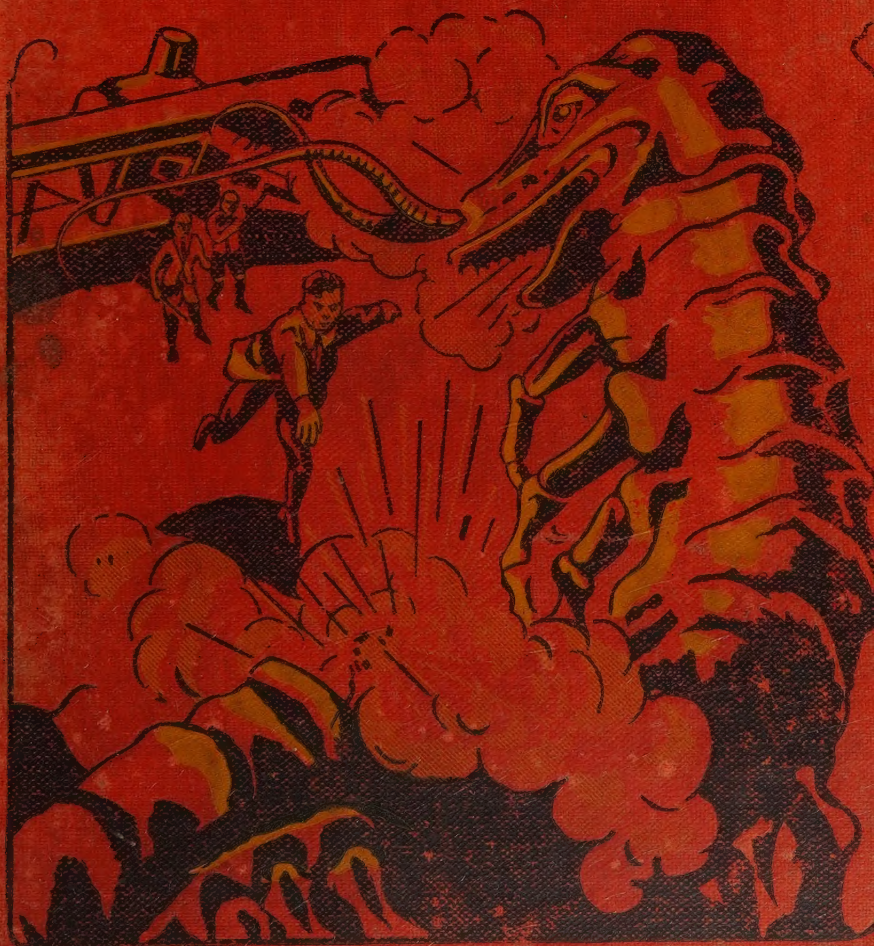


THE PEOPLE OF THE CHASM

By CHRISTOPHER BECK



Church of Saint Peter & Saint Paul.

Borden

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1928
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Vicar

THE PEOPLE OF THE CHASM

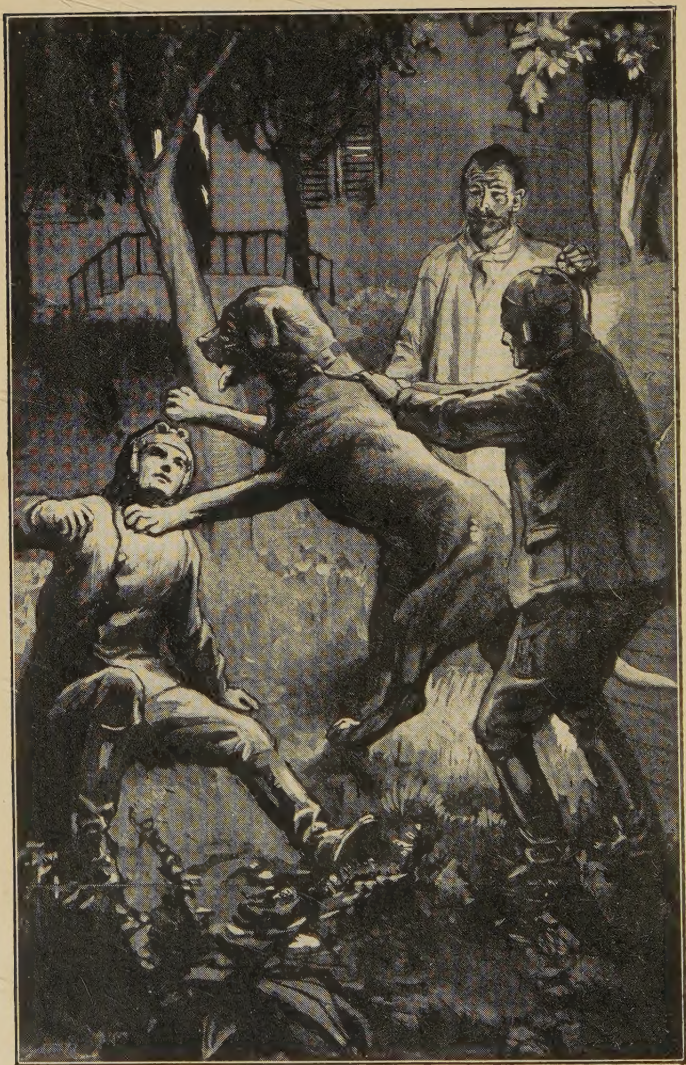
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But for Dick, the mastiff's teeth would have met in Monty's throat.

Frontispiece.

See page 20.

THE PEOPLE OF THE CHASM

BY

CHRISTOPHER BECK

Author of "The Brigand of the Air," etc.

WITH EIGHT FULL-PAGE ILLUSTRATIONS
BY THOMAS SOMERFIELD

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CHAPTER I

THE RECORD BREAKERS

As the great 'plane roared through the upper air, young Monty Vince sat with his eyes glued to the thick glass window of her enclosed body, and watched the sea of clouds lying like a pearly floor far below. Every nerve in his body tingled with excitement and triumph, for even he, small as was his experience, knew that this first flight of his brother's new machine was a magnificent success.

On and on she flew, and the cloud floor seeming to sink away told Monty that the great machine was still rising. Earth had long since been lost sight of, even the topmost clouds were far below, and they winged their way in solitary splendour, bathed in the cold sunlight of the upper levels.

Presently Monty noticed something new. The deep, steady roar of the enormously powerful engines seemed to be dropping in tone. It was steady as ever, yet certainly not so loud. Yes, there was no doubt about it, and with a sudden feeling of uneasiness, Monty rose from his seat and went forward to where his brother sat in the pilot seat, his long flexible fingers resting lightly on the delicate controls. Beautiful hands Dick

Vince had, almost as fine as any woman's, but the left was curiously marred by a long white scar which ran back from the second knuckle, disappearing under the sleeve of his pilot's jacket.

Monty leant over until his lips almost touched the other's ear. "Dick," he said, "Dick, what is the matter? Is anything wrong with the engines?"

Dick Vince looked up with a slight look of surprise. "Why, Monty—why do you think that?"

"Can't you hear? Don't you notice there's not half so much noise?"

Dick smiled, and the smile lit up very pleasantly his keen, clever face and clear, dark eyes. "Yes, I hear it. But that's only natural, Monty."

"Why?"

"Because of the height, old chap," and as he spoke Dick Vince pointed to the barograph, the height-recording instrument which was fixed on the instrument board in front of him.

Monty looked, and his eyes widened. "Good heavens, Dick, you don't mean to say that we are thirty thousand feet up?" he exclaimed.

"Not quite that, but we soon shall be. Twenty-nine thousand seven hundred is the exact figure."

"B-but isn't that a record?"

"If it isn't it soon will be," replied Dick, with quiet confidence.

For a minute or so Monty said nothing. The

marvels of this wonderful aeroplane rendered him speechless. When at last he spoke again his voice had a note of awe in it. "But I thought that no one could breathe at such a height, Dick. There's so little air."

Dick smiled again. "There's none under water, Monty, yet people go down three hundred feet in submarines."

Monty considered a little. "Then this is a sort of submarine of the air."

"Yes. The body is air-tight and almost cold proof. And when we need fresh air I simply turn on a little oxygen."

Again there was silence for a time, and again it was Monty who broke it. "But, Dick, if there is so little air up here how do the wings get a grip? How does the machine manage to fly at all?"

"That is a matter of construction, Monty. For her power, the *Falcon* is, I believe, the lightest machine ever built. This new alloy of mine saved a deal of weight, and then, these extension wings make a big difference. I get a lot more bearing surface, which makes up for the lesser density of the air."

Monty gazed at his brother with whole-hearted admiration. "Dick, I think you're an absolute marvel," he declared.

Dick turned to his brother. "The *Falcon* is a success, Monty," he said gravely. "There is no boasting in saying that. But I want you to

remember that, but for you, she could never have been built.

"No, don't interrupt me," he went on quickly, as he saw Monty's lips move. "I mean what I say. The credit is due to you just as much as to me. If you had not trusted me, if you had not put up the money, it could never have been done."

Monty shook his head impatiently. "Nonsense, Dick! It's no credit to me. You see I knew you'd make a go of it."

"You could not know that," answered Dick, as gravely as before. "That was impossible. Yet you handed over to me the whole of the legacy that Uncle John left you. As I said before, the *Falcon* owes her existence as much to you as to me, for if you had not put up the money she would never have been built. People don't trust a youngster like me with money for new inventions."

Monty brushed aside his brother's gratitude with a laugh. "Well, anyhow, she's a howling success, and since you have made me your partner, we're both going to make a fortune. What are you going to do with yours, Dick?"

"Explore," said Dick, quickly. "See parts of the world that no one knows anything about. Fly over the Himalayas and up across the Andes of Bolivia."

Monty's eyes shone. "Me, too!" he cried. "That's what I'd like best."

A sudden thought struck Monty, and he came back to Dick. "I say, Dick, where are you coming down?"

"How do you mean? I shall return to the aerodrome at Boltham."

"But you can't tell where it is. There is no sign of the earth—nothing but clouds."

"Yes, but when we dip back through the clouds we shall see the earth again."

Monty was silent, but somehow not quite easy in his mind. It was his first big ascent, and the loneliness up here oppressed him. It seemed to him that they were cut off completely from everything human.

And still the *Falcon's* nose was cocked upwards, and still she rose and rose. The cold outside must have been frightful, for even within the perfectly insulated and electrically heated interior Monty was beginning to shiver. Then quite suddenly the *Falcon* began to quiver in an odd way.

"What's the matter?" asked Monty, hastily.

"Wind," replied Dick, curtly. "We must have run into something pretty stiff. I've never struck anything like this before, Monty. It's a regular hurricane. I shall have to drop out of it. No machine that ever was built could fight it."

As he spoke he turned the 'plane completely round, and let her nose point downwards. The difference was amazing. All the fearful stress and strain ceased, and the sense of peace was a delightful change.

There was silence for a little while, then Monty spoke again. "Any idea which way we are travelling?" he asked.

"East, I am thankful to say," replied his brother.

"We must be a longish way from Boltham," said Monty.

"We are, I'm afraid, but anyhow, we are not being blown out into the Atlantic."

"But what price the North Sea, Dick?"

"We have petrol enough to cross that at a pinch," Dick told him, "but I hope we shan't have to do anything of the sort. All the same, I wish the clouds would break."

It was now getting late in the day, and although at this height the sun was still visible, yet the big golden globe was not far from setting.

Then, as Monty watched eagerly, suddenly the clouds broke, and they were beneath the thick canopy and flying through the gloom of a late evening. He looked down. "Dick—Dick!" he cried, "we're over the sea!"

CHAPTER II

THE HOUSE IN FRANCE

"I WAS afraid of it," was Dick's reply, but though his tone was grave he did not seem unduly disturbed. "Keep your eyes open, Monty. I think you will soon see land."

Some minutes passed, then Monty, watching with straining eyes, gave a sudden shout. "A light—a big light. It's away down to the right—south-east I should reckon."

"A lighthouse," responded Dick. "Somewhere on the Belgian or French coast, I expect. Give me the direction. I'll try and make it."

"But aren't you going back to England?"

"I doubt if I've got petrol. Besides, we should have to fight every inch of the way. Even down here there is a heavy westerly gale."

Monty was silent, but inwardly he was much excited. Never in his life before had he been out of England. This was a new adventure with a vengeance.

Dick spoke again. "We're almost over the lighthouse. I believe it's Griz Nez—south of Calais—but I can't be quite sure. I'm going to carry on and look for a landing. We mustn't risk damaging the *Falcon*."

Almost as he spoke everything was blurred again. A violent rainstorm filled the air. Monty saw that Dick, for the first time since starting, was now really worried. He himself knew that it was no joke to land in unknown country in such weather as this.

"I'm going up higher," Dick told Monty presently. "No good trying to land till it's a bit clearer."

But the rain did not stop, and though they knew that they were now far over the land, they were forced to keep going. It began to grow dark, and plainly Dick was becoming really worried. "It's petrol," he said, pointing to the gauge. "The tanks will be empty in another twenty minutes."

"The wind isn't quite so strong, is it?" said Monty, presently.

"No, but the weather is still as thick as ever."

"Not quite," replied Monty. "I can see lights below."

"Yes, a village, but I dare not go down yet. I can't see the ground."

The minutes passed all too quickly, and the petrol gauge sank and sank. Monty, watching it, felt desperate. Suppose they came down in a forest, and smashed their beautiful *Falcon* all to pieces. He had no more money to give his brother to build a new machine. It would be ruin—sheer ruin.

"Another five minutes will see us out of spirit," said Dick, frowning.

"I see lights again," replied Monty. "It's a bit clearer. Yes, and I can see big, open fields, too. Dick, it's now or never."

Dick merely nodded, and suddenly cut off the engine. The silence after the constant roar had a curiously numbing effect.

The *Falcon* was planing downwards and Monty breathlessly watched the dim ground which seemed to rise towards them.

Suddenly he gave a shout. "Trees just below. Look out, Dick!"

Dick switched on again, the *Falcon* lifted and narrowly cleared a line of tall poplars. "And a house!" cried Monty, as he caught a gleam of light. "That's better," he added. "Now there's a field. Bring her right down."

Another few seconds of tense anxiety, then the wheels touched the ground, and the big 'plane shot forward, bumping over rough grass. There was a bellowing as a herd of frightened cattle galloped away from the huge intruder. Then the pace slowed, and the *Falcon* came to rest.

"Splendid, Dick!" cried Monty delightedly.

But Dick was on his feet like a flash. "Quick, Monty! It's still blowing. We must anchor her firmly."

It was work they both understood well, and since the wind down here was not so strong as above, they had soon made a good job of it.

The next question was to find out where they were.

"There's the house," said Monty, "the one we just missed. Let's go and see who lives there. Luckily we can both talk a bit of French."

Dick agreed, and leaving the 'plane, they made their way through the darkness across the field, and presently arrived at a tall wall. "Must be a regular château," said Monty. "I wonder where the gate is."

They groped along the wall for some distance, and struck a big iron-studded door. There was an old-fashioned bell with a chain, which, as Monty pulled, gave a hoarse jangle. Instantly came a tremendous deep-mouthed baying.

"Sounds like a mastiff," said Monty. "I say, Dick, what have we struck?"

"Something out of the Middle Ages," replied Dick. "I only hope the brute is tied up."

There was a long delay before at last they heard bolts being pulled back. The big door swung open, and the light of an old-fashioned candle lantern showed them a tall, skinny-looking man of between forty and fifty, who wore a rusty black suit, and peered at them suspiciously with beady eyes deep-set under shaggy brows.

"What do you want?" he demanded in French.

"We are English airmen," responded Dick, in the same language. "We have been driven down here by bad weather, and we should be glad to

know where we are, and where we can get a night's lodging."

"You are boys—children," retorted the other. "You are not airmen."

Monty got red, but Dick kept his temper. "If you don't believe us, perhaps you will walk with us across the field and see our 'plane," he replied courteously.

The man scowled. "You wish to trap me," he snarled.

"Oh, don't be silly," snapped Monty, now really cross.

It was at this moment that another voice was heard. "Who are they, André? What is the trouble?"

The speaker had just come to the door of the tall, old-fashioned house, which the boys could dimly see at the end of a paved walk about thirty yards from the gate. He was a bigger man than André, but was lame, and propped himself with crutches.

André turned. "They say they are English airmen driven here by storm, Henri. But I think they are thieves."

"Bring them here that I may see," ordered the other.

The other grumbled beneath his breath, but obeyed. As the boys came up the path, suddenly an enormous mastiff sprang up and hurled itself on Monty. It was chained, but the chain was long enough for the brute to reach the path.

The force of the huge dog's leap knocked Monty down, and but for Dick next moment its teeth would have met in his throat. Quick as a flash Dick caught hold of the chain and gave it such a terrific jerk that it turned the dog right over on its back. Before it could recover, he had seized Monty and dragged him out of reach.

The elderly man, who seemed to be the master of the house, came hobbling forward on his crutches.

"That was well done. I trust the boy is not hurt." Then he turned on André and rated him well. "It is your doing that the kennel is placed so close to the path. How often have I told you to keep it out of reach?"

André did not answer, but his ugly, skinny face was one scowl.

"You must forgive my brother," said the other to Dick, speaking with a pleasant courtesy. "He is always afraid of burglars. My name is Javelot, and I am glad to see you. Now come in, both of you, and tell me what I can do to serve you."

Inside, the house was much more pleasant than out. The old gentleman took the brothers into a big, handsomely-furnished, high-ceilinged room, where a log fire was burning, and a table ready laid for supper. He made them sit down, and listened with the greatest interest to their story, which Dick told in plain and simple words. Luckily his French was good enough for this

purpose. When Dick spoke of the immense height to which the new *Falcon* had risen, Monsieur Javelot's eyes fairly glowed with excitement.

"But how did you breathe at such a height?" he asked.

Dick told him of the enclosed body of the *Falcon*, and of the peculiar construction which enabled those within the body to withstand the rarefied air and intense cold of the upper levels.

Monsieur Javelot leant forward, breathing quickly. It was clear that he was not only interested, but also intensely excited. Monty wondered inwardly what the reason could be.

"But this is wonderful," exclaimed the old Frenchman—"most wonderful! And for mere boys to invent and fly such a marvel! It amazes me!"

He was evidently going to say something else when the door opened and a hard-featured woman came in with a large tray loaded with dishes.

"Supper," said Monsieur Javelot. "You will be hungry, my young friends. Let us eat. Afterwards we will continue our conversation."

The supper was excellent. There were soup, roast chicken, with exquisitely-cooked vegetables, and dishes of stewed fruit, with rich yellow custard. The boys, who were both very hungry, did justice to the good things. The man called André, who, the boys discovered, was Monsieur Javelot's half-brother, ate with them, but never said a word. He looked sulky and upset. Afterwards

he helped the woman, who was his wife, to clear the table.

Then Monsieur Javelot made the boys sit over the fire, and began to talk again. He asked them about their plans, whether they meant to put the new 'plane on the market, and showed that he knew a good deal about aircraft.

His keen eyes fell upon the curious scar on Dick's hand.

"Pardon me," he said, "but that must have been a bad injury."

Dick shrugged his shoulders. "All in the way of business, monsieur. I got that the first time I ever handled a 'plane. She was an old war 'bus and went wrong, and started to nose-dive. The other chap and I had a pretty nasty half minute, and were lucky to get off with our lives."

Monty broke in quickly. "He's not telling you half of it, monsieur. One wing crumpled and the 'plane nose-dived right down upon a lake covered with skaters. It looked as if the machine would smash the ice and drown half of them. And Dick was handling her for the first time in his life. Dick kept his head, and somehow managed to flatten her out a bit and swing her into the trees on the right bank. Frank Saunders, who was with Dick, told me it was the quickest, cleverest bit of work he had ever seen in his life."

"Oh, that's all rot, Monty," said Dick, colouring. "It was the only thing to do."

"It was fine—splendid!" declared M. Javelot. "But tell me, Monsieur Vince, what do you mean to do with this wonderful new machine of yours?"

Laughingly, Dick told him that he and Monty hoped to make money, and then go exploring.

All the old gentleman's excitement returned. "You would explore? Ah, but of course, for you are English!" He paused, gazing at them, and they noticed that, in spite of his age, which must have been about sixty, his eyes were bright as a boy's.

"Tell me," he said, "would you explore a country less known than any other in the world?"

"Why, of course," replied Dick. "That is just what we want to do."

"But it would be dangerous—very dangerous."

"We'd take our chances," answered Dick, in his quiet way. "But what country do you mean?"

The other looked at him as if he would read his very soul.

"The Unknown Continent," he said. "The great Antarctica."

Dick started slightly. Monty's eyes widened.

"Could we do it?" asked Dick, doubtfully.

"Yes—in that marvellous machine of yours which laughs at cold or rare air."

Dick nodded. "It might be possible," he said, slowly.

"But of course it would be possible," replied the other. "And no other test could so perfectly

prove the powers of your machine. Listen to me. The one who is dearest to me in all the world, my only son, he is lost in that vast desert of ice." His voice shook slightly, but he went on. "Lost, yet something tells me he is not dead. And you—you two will find him for me. Is it not so?"

Dick and Monty stared. The proposal seemed crazy—impossible. Before either could think of a suitable reply the door opened, and André put his sour face round the corner. "It is your bed-time, brother."

Monsieur Javelot turned upon him and spoke with a curt anger which was in startling contrast to his recent mood. "I am busy, André. When I want you I will call you. Meantime, leave me alone."

André did not obey at once, but stood scowling fiercely. Then, growling something under his breath, he withdrew. Monty whispered to Dick, "Mark my words, Dick. That chap means mischief."

CHAPTER III

FOOTSTEPS IN THE NIGHT

“HE is a little troublesome, that brother of mine,” said Monsieur Javelot to the boys as André retired growling like an angry dog. “But he is devoted to me. He and his wife take care of me since the accident which lamed me. You will excuse him.”

The old gentleman was so charming that Dick and Monty would have done more than that to please him, and said so.

He smiled at them, then suddenly turned serious. “And now, my friends, to go back to what I was saying. This venture—this search—will you undertake it?”

“We should like to hear more about it, first, monsieur,” said Dick, frankly.

“But, certainly. I will tell you. My son, Anton, is a doctor and a clever scientist. It was as doctor that he was engaged to go with the Delange Scientific Expedition to the Antarctic. That was in the year 1914, just before the Great War. It was in 1916 that the party returned to France, but Anton—alas!—was not with them.”

The dear old gentleman paused, and choked a little. The two boys waited silently till he could continue.

“It was the Count Delange himself who came to me and told me the whole story. Anton, he said, volunteered for an expedition across the great ice-cap which, as you know, covers the whole of that vast continent. He went with three companions, and their object, so the Count told me, was to investigate a volcano of which the smoke had been seen from a high peak near the coast.

“Three weeks later, Anton’s three companions returned and told their chief that Anton was lost. It appears that the party gained a point within a few miles of the spot from which the smoke rose. But the curious point is that there was no mountain. The smoke or vapour rose from a crevice or valley in the ice itself. They had encountered very severe weather, and were all exhausted.

“But Anton, being the strongest of them, volunteered to go forward, alone, and investigate. Through their glasses they watched him tramp across the ice until he became a mere black dot in the distance. It seemed to them that he actually reached the edge of the rift and disappeared over it.

“Then suddenly one of the terrible storms which are called blizzards swept down from the south and instantly all sight of him, the smoke and everything was lost in the whirl of ice flakes. The storm lasted three whole days, at the end of which the three survivors struggled back

more dead than alive. After that the weather prevented any further attempts to discover the mystery of the smoke or to search for my son."

Again Monsieur Javelot stopped, unable to say more, and for a time the silence was broken only by the snapping of the flames of the wood fire.

It was Monty who spoke at last. "But, monsieur," he said, softly, "do you think there is any hope of Anton, your son, being still alive?"

The old gentleman fixed his eyes on the boy.

"Yes," he said, emphatically. "Yes. You may think me crazy, but in my dreams I have seen him again and again. And always he seems to be looking for me and for his old home."

"But there is no food in that Antarctic Continent," insisted Monty. "It is not like the Far North, where there are Eskimo and seals and musk oxen. Explorers say that there is no life at all on the Antarctic ice-cap."

"That is true. They all say so. Yet who knows? Not the thousandth part of that great waste has ever been explored. Smoke or vapour means heat, and with heat there might be herbage—animals—anything."

Monsieur Javelot paused. "And even if Anton is dead," he went on, presently, "I wish to know it definitely. I wish his body to be found."

Dick spoke up. "We will help you if we can, monsieur," he said, quietly.

Monsieur Javelot's bright eyes shone. "I thank you, my boy. That is all I ask."

Again there was silence for a time in the big warm room.

Monsieur Javelot moved and stretched his thin hands to the fire. "Messieurs," he said, quietly, "I am a rich man. I can afford to hire a ship and crew fit to take you and your aeroplane to the edge of the eternal ice. I shall also wish to pay you fairly for your trouble. If I am able, and my doctor will allow, I shall accompany you. You agree to my plan?"

"Certainly we do," replied Dick, "but don't you think that you are taking us rather on trust? You know nothing about us except what we have told you. You have not even seen our machine."

Monsieur Javelot smiled his very pleasant smile. "That troubles me not at all. I have eyes, and I know men. I can see that you are English gentlemen, and that satisfies me.

"But it grows late," he continued, "and you are tired. I shall now take you to the room which I have had prepared for you. To-morrow you will show me your flying machine, and we shall make further arrangements, and you shall communicate with your friends in England."

Dick shook his head. "There will be no need for that, monsieur. My brother and I are alone in the world. Our parents are dead, and we are entirely at your service."

"Alone, just as I am," said the old gentleman,

softly, and rose from his chair. Monty hastened to hand him his crutches, and he led the way out of the room.

"But our machine," said Dick, rather anxiously. "It is out in the field, monsieur. Can we not house it somewhere?"

"I had forgotten," said their host. "No, I have no building large enough for it. But the wind has quite fallen, the barometer is rising, and no one will meddle with it. Is it not safe where it is?"

Dick nodded. "In that case it will be all right, monsieur. We will leave it where it is."

Lame as he was, Monsieur Javelot insisted on showing them their room, and very comfortable it was.

Then he bade them sleep well, and left them.

"A dear old chap," said Dick, warmly.

"One of the best," agreed Monty, "but I can't say I like that fellow André."

"He is rather a queer fish," allowed Dick; "but I say, Monty, aren't we in luck? Fancy, what a chance to try out the *Falcon*. And such a splendid trip, and costing us nothing."

"On the contrary, we get paid," said Monty. "But it's a funny business altogether."

The two turned in, but it was a long time before either got to sleep.

Once Monty got to sleep, he usually slept for a good eight hours, so it was with rather a shock that he suddenly found himself sitting bolt upright

in pitch darkness. He glanced at his wrist watch, which had a luminous dial, and saw that it was not quite three o'clock.

"Now what on earth woke me up like that?" he wondered, and next instant he knew. Some one had passed the door of his room. A board had creaked. He listened hard. Another creaked. Some one was moving cautiously down the passage.

Like a flash Monty was out of bed. The room was not quite dark, for the blind was up, the window open, and there was enough starlight to see objects dimly. Silently Monty gained the door, and cautiously opened it a crack.

There was a light outside. A man carrying a small lantern was creeping downstairs. It was André, and he was fully dressed.

Suspicion flared up in Monty's brain, and on the instant he made up his mind to follow. It was the work of a few seconds only to pull on his trousers and coat. Then in his slippered feet he left the room and crept down the stairs. He heard the key turn in the lock of the front door, and reached the hall just in time to see André open the door.

CHAPTER IV

ANDRÉ SHOWS HIS TEETH

MONTY waited till André was well outside before following. Luckily the door opened quietly, and leaving it on the latch he got out in time to see André passing out through the gate in the wall.

Monty's heart beat hard as he followed. He had not the faintest idea what André was after, yet instinctively felt that there was something wrong. He was in a horrid fright that the big dog might hear and start barking, but seemingly the kennel had been moved, for there was no sign of the ugly brute. A minute later Monty was outside, and cautiously following the glimmer of the lantern across the field.

The barometer had not lied. All sign of the storm was gone, and the stars shone clearly in a cloudless sky. There was a breeze, but a very light one.

And now as he saw the direction in which André was going Monty's heart began to thump. For the man was making straight for the spot where the *Falcon* was moored.

What could he be after? As Monty tiptoed onwards his brain was busy with this problem, but could find no answer to it.

Through the starlit darkness Monty saw the *Falcon* looming up like a white ghost. André had almost reached the machine. Monty, suspecting he hardly knew what, watched him keenly. André was there, he was climbing up into the body. Monty grinned. The air-tight door was, he knew, not only closed but locked, and the key in his own trouser pocket. André would have a job to get in, if that was what he was after.

By this time Monty had pretty well come to the conclusion that André was simply inquisitive. He probably wanted to see what the 'plane looked like. Perhaps, too, he was anxious to find out all he could about the visitors, and thought there might be papers or letters inside the body.

Still watching, Monty saw the man try the door, but, failing to open it, come climbing back down to the ground. He crouched low, and Monty could not make out what he was at.

All of a sudden the light of his lantern seemed to grow brighter. There was a sudden flare which showed André's face up clearly. And its expression was so ugly and savage that for the moment Monty was badly startled.

The blaze shot up so suddenly that Monty saw it had nothing to do with the lamp. It was a mass of oily rag or paper which the man had lighted. Next moment he had flung it right upon the 'plane.

With a yell of horror and amazement, Monty hurled himself forward, and racing for the spot

leapt upon the framework, and seized the blazing mass. Heedless of burns, he flung it aside and it fell, flaming, to the ground. So quickly had he acted that the woodwork on which the torch had fallen was only scorched. No real harm was done.

Panting, Monty dropped back, and turned to tackle André. But the man was gone. There was not a sign of him. It was as if he had vanished into thin air.

"The brute!" gasped Monty. "So he was trying to burn the *Falcon*." He stamped the fire out as he spoke, then as the last spark was extinguished felt that he had been a fool. If André was still about, the man might creep upon him out of the darkness, and attack him. Then he remembered the key, and climbing up, unlocked the door and went inside. He found a big spanner and crouched there, ready for anything that might happen.

But nothing did happen, and the quiet night was unbroken by any sound.

At last Monty ventured to move and make himself more comfortable. The night air was chilly, and he put on a heavy pilot coat. "And now I'll jolly well stay here till morning," he said to himself.

Suddenly his nerves went tense, and his grasp tightened on the wrench.

Some one was coming. He crept to the door and looked out. Sure enough, there were footsteps coming hurriedly across the grass towards

the 'plane. The night was so quiet, he could hear them plainly. "Surely the beggar can't be coming back?" he exclaimed to himself.

"Monty, Monty! Are you there?" It was Dick's voice in a sharp whisper.

"You, Dick?" exclaimed Monty, in astonishment.

"Yes. Who was it who was playing the fool with the 'plane?"

"It was that pig, André," replied Monty, as Dick came up.

"André!" Dick's tone showed that he was simply flabbergasted. "You're crazy, Monty. It was André told me."

It was Monty's turn to be amazed. "Of course it was André," he replied, sharply. "Why, I followed him out of the house, all the way here, and was just in time to stop him from setting fire to the 'plane."

"But it was André who woke me not five minutes ago, and told me that you were out here after some chap who, he believed, was interfering with the machine."

By this time Dick was with Monty in the enclosed body of the 'plane. He had switched on an electric lamp, and in its white light the two brothers stood, gazing at one another. For the moment Monty was too amazed to answer, but it did not take him long to recover.

"I've got it," he cried, sharply. "It was a dodge to get you out of the house. Having failed

to burn the 'plane, that was his next idea. My word, the old scoundrel is smart."

Dick's eyes were still wide. He looked hopelessly perplexed. "I'm still all at sea, Monty. What's the fellow after?"

"It's as plain as a pikestaff, Dick. André, for some reason of his own, is jealous of us. He doesn't want his brother to have anything to do with us. Tell you what—I'll bet you a bob that, if we go back, we shall find the outer door shut and locked against us."

Dick was silent. He was evidently trying to sort things out. "But Monsieur Javelot is the owner of the place," he objected. "He can do as he likes with his own house and money."

"You've hit it at once," replied Monty, quickly. "It's the money that André is after. By Jove, I see it all. Now that the old man's son is dead, André is, most likely, the next heir. The idea that his brother might use all his fortune in trying to find his son is what's upsetting André. That's why he's trying to get rid of us."

"But it's so futile," objected Dick. "Even if he has locked the door against us, as you say, we've only to wait until morning, and then Monsieur Javelot himself will let us in."

"Will he?" said Monty. "I don't know so much about that. Remember the poor old boy is lame, and I very much doubt if they'll let him out of the house at all."

"Well, let's go and try the gate," said Dick.

"You can. I'm going to stay here."

"For that matter, André is in the house, and probably in bed," said Dick. "All the same, perhaps you'd better stay here. I'll go back."

He went off and disappeared in the darkness. Monty had not long to wait, for in about five minutes his brother was back.

"You are perfectly right, old man. The door is locked, and though I rang for all I was worth, there was no answer."

Monty merely nodded. "I think we know just about where we are now. Well, I suppose we'd best wait till morning, then find the nearest town, get some petrol, and fly back to Boltham."

Dick stared at his brother. "You're not serious, Monty?"

Monty laughed. "Of course I'm not. I was only pulling your leg, Dick. If friend André thinks he's got the better of us he's precious well mistaken. Why, bless you, I'd camp here a month rather than let him score off us in that silly way."

Dick laughed at his brother's speech, but then turned serious. "We mustn't despise the fellow, Monty. A chap like that can make himself horribly unpleasant. Now, since we can't get back into the house, let's get some sleep here. We can be quite comfy for the rest of the night."

Monty agreed, and rolling themselves up in their coats they lay down.

Dick was almost asleep when Monty sat up

sharply. "I say, Dick, here's a go. I'd quite forgotten till this minute, but all my clothes, except my trousers, and coat and my slippers are still in the house."

CHAPTER V

HOW ANDRÉ WAS TRICKED

MORNING dawned fine, but decidedly cool, and though inside the closed body of the *Falcon* the boys were snug enough, Monty found, when outside, that his costume was far too cool for comfort.

They washed in a pond, made breakfast off some remains of food which they had brought with them from England, and at about seven sallied out.

Just as Monty had predicted, the gate in the garden wall was locked, and pulling the bell brought no reply. "Bet old André's cut the wire," said Monty.

"Quite likely, I should think," said Dick, in his serious way. "We'd better walk round the wall, and see if there is any other way in."

Monty glanced at his brother. "I say, haven't you brought a stick or anything?" he asked.

"What—to tackle André?" said Dick, with some scorn.

"No, you juggins, to tackle the dog."

"I'd forgotten the dog," confessed Dick.

"Well, I haven't. And I've got a dose for him all right."

Dick asked no questions, and the two went

on round the wall. The place was bigger than they had thought. The wall enclosed more than an acre of ground. It was eight or nine feet high, and topped everywhere with broken glass. A nasty thing even to try to climb.

"There might be a tree," said Dick.

But there was no tree, and the job seemed hopeless.

Monty set his teeth. "I'm going to get over, if it takes a week," he vowed. Then suddenly he gave a sharp exclamation. "What's this? A ditch. No, a little brook, and look, Dick! It comes right out from under the wall."

Dick's eyes brightened, and he jumped quickly down into the narrow channel, which was half hidden by tall grass and weeds. Bending double, he pushed forward.

"Good egg, Monty!" he said presently, in a low, quick whisper. "We can get through."

It took a bit of squeezing, but they did it, and presently Monty put his head up, to find himself inside the wall. The ditch drained a good-sized pond, which was evidently used to water the garden.

He looked carefully round.

"It's all right, Dick. No sign of André," he said. "We'd best make straight for the front door. If we go to the back we might run into Mrs. André."

Dick nodded, and both climbed up out of the ditch. As they did so there was a sudden rush, and out of the bushes near by the big mastiff

came with a silent fury that was most alarming.

"All right, Dick!" sang out Monty, and leapt between Dick and the dog.

As he did so, he thrust his hand into his pocket, and brought it out filled with black dust, which he flung full in the brute's face.

The result was amazing. The dog went up in the air as if it had been shot, and coming down began running round in circles, howling, and every now and then digging its nose into the earth.

"Heavens, Monty, what have you done?" gasped Dick.

"All right, only a little pepper," chuckled Monty. "Do him no real harm—just teach him to keep his teeth to himself."

"Arrêtez!"

The voice came from just behind the boys, and both jumped round to find themselves face to face with André. The man's mean face was twisted with rage, his deep-set eyes glowed, and his lips, drawn back, showed his jagged teeth. He was not a pretty sight. But what was much worse than his looks, he was carrying a gun. A dreadful, rusty-looking old blunderbuss, probably fifty years old, but still a gun, and as both triggers were cocked, evidently loaded.

The two obeyed the order, and stopped very short indeed. André stormed at them in rapid French, yet not loudly. It seemed as though he were afraid of being overheard. Still there was no mistaking his meaning, which was that

they were to make themselves scarce at once, if not sooner.

He intimated that they were to go out the same way they had come.

"No, we will go by the gate," retorted Dick, speaking in French.

Monty spoke up. "No, Dick, we'll go by the ditch."

Dick glanced at him quickly, caught the slightest possible wink, and realized that his resourceful young brother had something up his sleeve.

"You go first," said Monty, very quietly. "I'll follow."

Dick began getting down into the ditch. He went slowly as if he was stiff and lame, and when he got down into the ditch paused, and began to remonstrate, vowing that it was a very difficult place to get through and that he could not do it unless André turned his gun away.

Just as Monty had hoped, the Frenchman grew more and more angry. He stamped, shouted, and threatened, and finally, turned his back on Monty in order to try and force Dick into the passage under the wall.

It was exactly what Monty had been waiting for. One spring, and he was upon the man. Flinging all his weight against him, he forced him right over the edge of the ditch, and down he went, head foremost, into the mud and water at the bottom. By the mercy of Providence, the dreadful old gun failed to go off, and next

instant it was buried in the mud, with its owner on top of it.

Dick could move quickly enough when necessary, and this time he did not waste a second. Almost before André was down he was on him. Down came Monty, too, and between them the wretched André never had a chance.

"I've got his hands," said Monty. "Your handkerchief, Dick. Tie him!"

"Look out! You'll drown the fellow."

"Good job if I did, but don't you worry about that. Tie his hands behind him. Then we'll lift him out."

It was done, and André, completely helpless, was lifted out of the ditch. He was soaked, and was covered with mud from head to foot, especially his face, which was so plastered with black slime that there wasn't much of it visible.

"Pretty picture, isn't he?" remarked Monty, scornfully.

"I hope it will be a lesson to him," said Dick, in his grave way.

"Bah, you'll never teach a chap like that anything!" replied Monty. "Now, what are we to do with him?"

"There's a garden house over there. We can put him inside and leave him till we've seen Monsieur Javelot."

Monty nodded. "That's the ticket. We mustn't let his wife get on to it. She's liable to make trouble."

Between them they dragged the man to the garden house and dumped him in among the rakes and hoes. He glared at them, but remained silent.

"What a man!" said Monty, as they locked the door and left him. "Bet I was right, Dick, and that he and his precious wife are after the old man's money."

"I shouldn't wonder," allowed Dick, quietly.

The two moved towards the house. They were careful not to show themselves, for as Monty had said, André's wife was likely to be on the look-out. They made for the front door, and got there without interruption.

The door was closed and locked, and the boys exchanged glances. Then Monty signed to Dick and moved on towards the sitting-room windows, which were to the left. Monty's quick eyes had spotted that one of these was open. He peeped in, and pointed.

There was Monsieur Javelot sitting by a small fire. His head was sunk between his shoulders, and he looked sad, old, and dejected.

Monty whistled softly. Monsieur Javelot looked round, and an expression of utter amazement widened his eyes.

"You!" he said, breathlessly. "But no, I am dreaming."

"Not much, monsieur," replied Monty quickly.

"May we come in?"

Without waiting for a reply, he pushed up the sash, and scrambled in, and Dick followed.

By this time Monsieur Javelot had his sticks and was on his feet.

"Good morning, monsieur," said Monty, cheerfully.

"Mais—mais je ne comprends pas—I do not understand," gasped the Frenchman. "I—I was told that you had run away in the night."

"By André Tissot, I presume, monsieur," said Monty.

"Y-yes—by André."

Monty paused a moment. It seemed brutal to destroy the old man's trust in his half-brother, yet it had to be done. And perhaps the sooner, the better.

The boy turned suddenly grave. "Monsieur Javelot," he said, "last night I heard a sound, and, getting up, saw your brother leaving the house. I followed him. He went straight to our 'plane and tried to burn it. Luckily I was in time to stop him. He ran back to the house, told my brother a lying story, and got him out of the place. Then he locked the gate against us. This morning we got in under the wall. He set the dog on us and faced us with a gun. Luckily we were able to trick him, and at present he is tied up in your garden house."

CHAPTER VI

ANDRÉ TRIES ONCE MORE

MONSIEUR JAVELOT had listened in a state bordering on stupefaction. As Monty ceased speaking, the old man's knees gave way under him and he dropped back into his chair.

"But it is incredible!" he gasped. "It is beyond belief. Why should André behave in such a fashion?"

Monty took him up quickly. "Monsieur," he said, "to whom does your property go at your death?"

Monsieur Javelot's jaw dropped. "I—I—to my son, of course," he answered.

"But suppose—suppose that your son is no longer alive?" said Monty, quietly.

A new light seemed to dawn on the old man. "Then—then—it is André."

Monty nodded. "And if you spend your money on finding Anton, André gets so much the less. Is that not so, monsieur?"

Poor Monsieur Javelot was quite overcome. He could only nod. But there was lots of pluck in the old chap, and presently he pulled himself together and sat up straight. "You are right, Monsieur Vince. I see it all now. I have been

living in a fool's paradise. Without doubt André has been grinding his own axe. But now you have opened my eyes, and I give you my word I shall not close them again easily." He paused, then went on: "André shall leave. He and his wife, both, they shall leave at once. I will tell them so."

He struggled to his feet again.

"Then I think we will accompany you, monsieur," said Dick, with sudden briskness. "André, it is true, is in no condition to make trouble, but his wife will most certainly do so."

The words were hardly out of Dick's mouth before the door burst open, and in bounced Madame Tissot. She was fairly flaming, and poured out a perfect torrent of abuse upon the boys. They were good-for-nothing vagabonds. They had robbed the house, broken into it, assaulted her husband, killed him. They were trying to steal Monsieur Javelot's money. There was nothing too bad for her to say.

Monsieur Javelot waited with admirable patience until the angry woman paused, literally breathless.

Then he spoke, and his voice had a ring in it which the boys had not heard before. "The boot is on the other foot, Amelie," he said. "It is you and your husband who are trying to rob me. No, do not deny it, for it is useless. I have proofs. You and André will leave this house to-day—at once! Go and pack your things. You hear me!"

Madame Tissot opened her mouth again, but only to gasp. She was literally beyond speech. For a moment she glared furiously at Monsieur Javelot and the boys, then, whirling round, rushed out of the room.

After breakfast Monsieur Javelot was quite himself again, and full of ideas for the expedition. He said he would hire a ship at Marseilles and sail straight for the Antarctic. He intended, he declared, to try to find an English ship, with a captain accustomed to navigate among ice.

When breakfast was over—not before—the boys sallied out and released André. The man knew he was beaten, and said nothing. But his face was that of a panther behind bars. After they had seen him and his wife off the premises, Dick turned to Monty. "That man means mischief," he said, quietly.

Monty nodded. "Yes, but his teeth are drawn, Dick. I don't think he can do us any harm now."

"I don't know. I hope not," responded Dick. "But I can tell you this, I'm not going to take any chances."

Monty glanced in the direction where the *Falcon* lay like a great yellow bird with wings asprawl across the grass. "You mean about the *Falcon*?"

"Just so. I'm going to get her under cover just as quick as ever I can."

"You'd best stay and watch her," said Monty. "I'll go and get petrol. Monsieur has a pony and trap, and he has told me the way to the

village. I'll go off at once and bring back enough to take her under cover."

"Find out where the nearest shed is, big enough to hold her," said Dick. "If there isn't one near, we shall have to get her inside the garden wall. But that would be a precious awkward job, and we should probably smash up monsieur's garden."

Monty nodded. "I'll fix it up," he declared.

Presently Dick saw him jogging off. The gate was locked behind him, so even if André should come back, Monsieur Javelot was safe for the present. All the same, Dick had an anxious time, waiting, and was only too grateful when at last he saw Monty driving back, with the trap loaded up with petrol tins.

He drove right across the field to where the *Falcon* lay, and jumped down quickly. "Great luck, Dick," he exclaimed. "There's an old aircraft camp left over from the war, at Joinville, only eight miles away, and the préfet of the town says we can use one of the hangars. Monsieur Javelot had given me a note to him, and he was civil as pie."

Dick smiled. "Well, the war did us some good," he observed. "I think I'll take her over there at once."

But Monty shook his head. "Not yet, Dick. You've got to give monsieur a trial flight. He's mad to go."

Dick whistled softly. "All right," he said.

"You'd better fetch him in the cart, while I fill up."

Monty nodded and turned the pony. Dick had barely got his tank filled before his brother was back, and with him Monsieur Javelot, wearing a thick coat, and with his bright eyes shining with excitement.

"Have you ever been up before, monsieur?" asked Dick, as he helped the other up into the car.

"Not I! But it is never too late to mend, or to ascend," smiled Monsieur Javelot.

"It is a little alarming, the first time," Dick warned him, as he put him in a comfortable seat next the window.

Monty, having unharnessed the pony, and turned it loose to graze, followed them into the car. Dick started up the engine, and next minute the big machine was rushing across the field. She lifted just in time to escape the fence, and rose with amazing swiftness.

Dick glanced at Monsieur Javelot. So far from being frightened, he was gazing downwards, with an expression of absolute delight on his thin face.

Presently he turned to Monty. "Oh, it is magnificent!" he cried. "I can forget my lameness. I feel as if I had wings. I should like to fly all day."

Up and up Dick drove his wonderful machine until, within a few minutes, hundreds of square miles of the lovely country of France were in view

beneath them. Monsieur Javelot sat entranced, and so delighted was he that Dick went higher than he had at first intended. He drove the *Falcon* right up through the fleecy clouds into the blaze of cold sunlight above them.

It was nearly an hour before he at last turned to descend, and by that time the frost was thick on the windows of the 'plane, yet inside the electric heaters kept her warm and comfortable. Then came the long silent swoop as the *Falcon* volplaned down from the heights. For a few minutes she was wrapped in dense mist as she swirled back through the clouds. Then with a cry of delight Monsieur Javelot pointed downwards.

"There is my house!" he exclaimed. "Right beneath us. Monsieur Monty, how wonderful a pilot is your brother!"

Monty did not answer. There was a look of surprise, almost of alarm, on his small brown face.

"But there is a crowd at the gate," he said, sharply. "What are all those people doing there, monsieur?"

Monsieur Javelot stared downwards, and his expression, too, changed.

"I do not know. There must be something wrong. See, they are trying to break down the gate."

"Look out, Dick!" shouted Monty to his brother. "Switch her on again. There's something on down below, and I'll lay that scoundrel André has something to do with it."

CHAPTER VII

ANDRÉ'S LAST EFFORT

"YES, it is André," declared Monsieur Javelot, gazing downwards. His face hardened as he spoke, and there was a curious glitter in his keen eyes.

"Tell you what, monsieur, we had better go off to the aerodrome at Joinville," said Dick. "These people are in an ugly mood."

"No!" snapped back the old Frenchman. "I will not run away from my neighbours. Put me down among them. I will talk to them."

Monty glanced at him admiringly. "That's the ticket!" he cried. "Down with her, Dick!"

In a moment the big 'plane had reached the ground, landing so lightly that there was not the slightest jar. The moment she came to rest the crowd swung round, and came running towards her. There were some twenty men, most of them armed with sticks or pitchforks. André led them, and by their angry faces it was plain that he had been filling them with lies.

"There, I told you so! They have kidnapped my poor brother!" he shrieked.

"Death to the thieves! Death to the scoundrels!" roared the crowd.

There was a very ugly tone in their threats, but Monsieur Javelot did not seem to care a pin. He was up and out with wonderful quickness for a man as lame as he.

"Stop!" he cried, sharply, raising his hand with an arresting gesture. "Stop! You have heard André. Now hear me. Have I not as good a right to be heard as he?"

"No! The Englishmen have bewitched him!" shrieked André at the pitch of his voice. "Do not listen to him!"

But a big, bull-necked fellow stepped in front of André. "Be quiet, little man," he ordered. "As Monsieur Javelot says, it is but fair that we should hear what he has to say."

His great roaring voice smothered André's shrill scream, and for a moment there was silence.

Monsieur Javelot did not lose his chance. "My friends," he said, coolly. "Are you not a little ungrateful? It was English airmen who helped us to beat the Boche. Now it is English airmen who have promised to help me to find my dear son, Anton."

"To find Anton!" broke in the big man. "This is news to us."

"It would be," replied Monsieur Javelot, with quiet scorn. "It is not to André's interest to tell you the truth, which is that he desires to secure all my money, and is therefore angry that I spend some in the effort to find my boy."

The big man frowned. "This puts a new face on the matter," he said.

"The true one," replied Monsieur Javelot, quickly. "Am I not at liberty to do as I please with my own money? Must I ask André before I spend it? What say you, Jules Breguet?"

"No," said the big man. "That would be absurd."

"It is all a lie!" shrieked André. "I only wish to save my brother from being robbed by these good-for-nothing adventurers."

Monsieur Javelot swung round on him. "You are a good judge of truth, are you not, André?" he said, scornfully. "You who swore falsely that you were over age when you were called upon to fight for France against the Boche."

André went white. He staggered.

"Is this true?" growled big Breguet. "But yes, I can see by his face that it is true." Turning, he caught André by the collar of his coat. André lost his nerve, ducked, wrenched himself away, and ran for it. In a moment the whole crowd were after him.

"Stop!" cried Monsieur Javelot, but it was no use.

"They will kill him!" groaned Monsieur Javelot. Dick heard, and like a flash started up the 'plane again. He drove her along the ground, and in a moment had cut in between André and his pursuers.

"Get hold of him, Monty!" he shouted, and

checked the speed a little. As the 'plane swept by, her wheels rushing over the close turf, Monty, clinging to the framework, managed to grasp André and pull him up.

"I've got him!" he yelled, and Dick, putting on speed, rose into the air. André shrieked with terror, but by this time Monty had dragged him into the body. Here the wretched man collapsed, and lay shivering, trembling with fright, while the *Falcon* fled through the air towards the Joinville aerodrome. There they came gently to ground again, but André was so terrified by his first flight that he could hardly stand.

His half-brother spoke sternly. "André, I am sadly disappointed in you. You have forfeited all right to share in any money of mine, but I remember that you are my relative, and I will not leave you and your wife to starve. I shall instruct my lawyer to pay you a hundred francs a month, but only on condition that you trouble me no more. You understand?"

"I agree," said André, sullenly, and the miserable man slunk away.

Monsieur Javelot spoke again. "And now I think we will go back," he said, quietly. "I shall have many letters to write. At my age one does not wish to waste time, and it is my desire to set out on our expedition as soon as possible."

Monty smiled. "Then why waste time writing letters, monsieur? Would it not be best

to see the shipowners and people personally?"

Monsieur Javelot gazed at Monty in surprise. Monty explained. "You could be in Paris in two hours if you wished," he remarked.

Monsieur Javelot gave a little gasp. "And they talk of English people being slow!" he exclaimed. "You take my breath away, Monsieur Monty." He paused. "It shall be as you say," he continued. "But first I must go home and pack a few necessities. Then this afternoon we will go to Paris."

"Right!" said Dick, in his quiet way, and started off.

It took but a few minutes to get back, and when they arrived at the house the crowd was gone. One man, however, was left. It was the big Jules Breguet, who was still chuckling over the way in which the boys had switched André out of trouble.

Monsieur Javelot was fond of the big, good-natured fellow, and asked him to stop to lunch. Since André and his wife were gone they had to cook for themselves. Breguet took a hand, and turned out a capital omelette which they all enjoyed. While they ate, they talked over their plans, and Breguet listened with interest.

"A ship!" he said. "You want a ship? But you have come to the right shop. I"—he smote himself on his great chest—"I can tell you of a ship. My son, Jean, is aboard the whaler *Penguin*, which has just arrived at Brest. She

is an English ship, and her captain, Monsieur Bates, is an Englishman."

"That sounds good!" exclaimed Monty, eagerly.
"But is she for charter?"

"I do not know," replied Breguet; "but my Jean, he has written to me that the whaling is a failure and that he is to be paid off. It seems likely that the owners would be glad to do business."

"It does, indeed," put in Monsieur Javelot, as eagerly as Monty himself. "Say, now, my friend, will you telegraph at once to your son and ask him?"

"But of course I will, and it may be that you will take him—Jean—with you?"

"If the ship suits, we certainly will," declared Monsieur Javelot. "Wait now, and I will write the telegram."

He did so, and Monty went off with it at once. Then they waited impatiently for the reply. It came before night: "*Penguin* is for charter. Am leaving for home to-night to give all details.—Jean Breguet."

Monty gave a whoop of joy, and did a war dance round the table. "Our luck's in!" he exclaimed. And Monsieur Javelot smiled and said he really believed it was.

Next day Jean Breguet arrived. He was a stocky, dark-haired fellow with a straight look in his eyes which pleased the boys at first sight. He was second mate of the *Penguin*, and knew the ship "inside out." She was of six hundred tons,

schooner rigged, with oil-driven engines. She was only about eight years old, staunch and seaworthy. Jean had got the terms of contract in his pocket, and they were not too high. In an hour the whole thing was settled, and a cable sent to the *Penguin's* owners at Hull, offering a definite charter.

“And now we have got to get busy,” declared Monsieur Javelot. “Jean, you and I shall go and see Captain Bates, and between us arrange for fitting out the ship. Monsieur Dick and his brother will go to London, and there procure what matters they require for their part of the journey.”

Though lame in body, there was nothing wrong with Monsieur Javelot's brain, and the energy which he displayed was simply amazing. Next day he found a caretaker for his house, and the whole party left, he and Jean by rail for Brest, and the boys in the *Falcon* for England.

Well supplied with money, they had no difficulty in getting all the spare parts and equipment they required. They worked like fury, and so apparently did Monsieur Javelot. Within a fortnight the *Penguin* was ready for sea, with the *Falcon* dismantled packed safely between decks.

CHAPTER VIII

THE KILLERS

"ICE ! Ice in sight !" Monty came flying down the companion into the main cabin of the *Penguin* where Dick was sitting, deep in a book dealing with Antarctic exploration. "Ice, Dick !" he repeated, eagerly. "A thundering great berg ! Come and see !"

Dick followed his excited brother.

"Ugh, it's cold enough, anyhow !" he grumbled, as they emerged on deck. The *Penguin*, with all sails set, was running before a brisk nor'-westerly breeze, with her bows pointed due south. They had passed Gough Island, and were in latitude 42 degrees south.

Dick stared at the great mass of ice which his brother pointed out—a huge berg with blunted pinnacles rising a hundred feet or more against the pale blue sky.

"A good bit of difference between south and north, eh, Monty ?" he said.

"How do you mean, Dick ?"

"Why, we're only about as far south as Madrid is north. Lucky for old England that ice doesn't swim in 42 degrees north."

Monty nodded. "I'd never thought of that."

"You will have plenty of time to think about it," broke in another voice, a deep, hearty one, and Captain Bates came up to where the two brothers were standing. The skipper was a short man, who looked even shorter than he was by reason of his tremendous breadth. He had a forty-two-inch chest, enormous physical strength, a square jaw, and a temper which it took a good deal to disturb. "From this on we shan't often be out of sight of ice," he continued. "Beastly stuff!" he added. "The more I see of it the less I like it."

Bates's prophecy proved a true one, and within three days after passing the first berg the *Penguin* was meshed in a tangle of ice-fields. Still, there were plenty of channels, and the skipper, who had had years of experience of ice, managed to keep the ship moving always towards the south.

They were a long way south of Bouvet Island before they got into real trouble, for here they found their way south blocked by an ice-field so gigantic that even from the crow's-nest they could see no end of it either east or west. Captain Bates turned eastward, and coasted slowly along the edge of the field, hoping to reach the end. Instead, he found that the field swung northwards, leaving them in a sort of bay with ice to the south and east.

It was beautiful weather, almost dead calm, and the sun's rays were reflected with dazzling brilliance from the endless fields of floe ice. The

sea itself was a vivid green. Everything looked lovely, but Captain Bates did not enjoy these beauties. His question was whether to turn round and steam all the way back westwards, or wait where they were in the hope that a wind might come and break up the ice-fields.

Since it was necessary to economize in fuel, he eventually made up his mind to wait.

Monty, who was always as keen as mustard, made the suggestion that they should get out the *Falcon* and fly high enough to get some idea of the size of the ice-field, but Dick vowed that this was out of the question, because of the difficulty in rising and landing.

Monty's next discovery was that there were seals on the ice, and he begged Captain Bates that he and Dick might be allowed to go and shoot them.

The skipper smiled. "Well, I was going to send a boat to get some snow to melt down for fresh water. Yes, you and Dick can go. But you must take Jean Breguet with you. He knows the ice, and you don't."

Monty was full of excitement, and rushed off to get a rifle. A boat was lowered, and with Breguet and three other men and the boys in it, was pulled across to the floe. As they came near the ice Monty fell silent. The scene was really too wonderful for words—the barrier of glittering ice stretching mile upon mile in each direction, the water calm as glass except for the slight

swell, lying there black under the shadow of the floe, the intense silence, the only sign of life being the beautiful little snow petrels flitting like snow-flakes through the sun-bathed air.

It was a bit of a scramble to get on to the floe, for the edges were thin and rotten, and the boys would have got a ducking but for Jean, who first broke away the edges with an iron bar and then helped them up.

Once on the floe the going was good enough. Monty looked about eagerly for the seals. There they were, but so far off that they looked mere black dots on the gleaming surface. They lay about two hundred yards in from the edge of the floe.

“Why do they go so far from the water?” Monty asked of Jean.

“Zey are not so far as you sink,” replied Jean, who spoke English with a strong French accent. “Zey ’ave zeir own blow ’ole in ze ice. Ve must be vair careful, or zey vill jump down ’im.”

Monty nodded. “You lead the way, then,” he said.

Jean went down on all fours, and the two boys copied his example. The stalk was long and difficult, for there were cracks here and there, which they had to cross or go round. In spite of the chill of the ice, the sun was hot, and they were soon, all three, dripping with perspiration. The only comfort was that the seals did not move, and

Monty began to have pleasant visions of fresh seal liver fried with bacon for breakfast.

At last Jean stopped behind a small hummock. They were now within about a hundred yards of the seals, but between them and the animals the ice was all flat and open. "I sink you 'ave to shoot from here," he said. "If we go nearer, zey vill run away."

Monty hastily loaded his rifle, and so did Dick.

"Quick!" muttered Jean. "I give ze word. Zen you both shoot at once."

The two boys lay down and took careful aim, one at the left-, the other at the right-hand seal.

"Now!" said Jean, and the two rifles cracked as one. Dick's seal went over, quivered slightly, and lay still, but Monty's went off full pelt across the ice.

"Missed!" snapped Monty, firing again. But the second bullet went high, and they saw it cut the ice and ricochet out to sea. Next moment the seal had vanished—no doubt into its air hole.

"Well, you've got one anyhow, Dick," said Monty, concealing his disappointment, and he and the rest went hurrying across the ice towards the dead creature.

They had nearly reached the spot, when suddenly a seal, apparently the one that Monty had missed, shot out of the water at the edge of the ice, and, landing on the floe, came flapping towards them at amazing speed.

"What the mischief——" began Monty, then stopped, gasping.

For out of the water, just where the seal had made its jump, was suddenly thrust the most grim and terrible head ever seen outside a nightmare. Black as a boot, it looked as if carved out of solid rubber. Its front seemed square, but gashed with an enormous mouth armed with sharp, ivory-like teeth, each about four inches long.

"Did you ever see such a brute?" gasped Monty, and was starting forward again, when Jean's strong fingers closed on his arm. "Stop! It is ze killer!" he cried.

"Killer—what do you mean?"

"Ze killer whale. Ze wolf of ze sea. Keep vere you are!"

"Why, what's the matter? A whale can't walk on the ice."

"No, but ze whale can break ze ice."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before the whole floe quivered with a fresh shock, as the mighty killer leapt again, and, falling with all his giant weight on the edge of the pack, broke away a great mass of it. Then suddenly, close behind him, a second and a third monster rose out of the glassy sea, and after more—a dozen at least in all.

"Run, run!" cried Jean. "Back on ze thick part! Zey 'ave smelt us!"

Almost as he spoke, there was a crash right under

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their feet; the floe broke, and a spout of water dashed up. The shock flung them all to their knees, and through the turmoil of broken ice and spray they plainly saw the head of another killer bursting into view.



The mighty killer whale leapt again, falling on the edge of the ice, which gave way under its enormous weight.

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CHAPTER IX

THE GREAT BARRIER

MONTY felt himself slipping forward into the hole made by the rush of the sea monster. He struggled desperately, but in vain. Then Jean's powerful hand gripped him, and in the very nick of time drew him back.

"Up! Get up quickly!" he heard him cry, and somehow he struggled to his feet, and he and Dick and Jean together went stumbling over the heaving ice.

Thundering blows crashed on the bottom of the floe beneath them, and the ice quivered and cracked as though an earthquake were shaking it. Monty felt as if it must all break into fragments under such a terrible bombardment. The whole thing was like a bad dream, and he did not believe it possible that they could escape alive.

"Further, a leetle further," Jean was calling in his ear. "Do not despair. We shall be safe soon."

Monty did not believe him for a moment, but the mere blind instinct to try and save his life drove him on. More than once he fell flat on the ice, bruising himself badly, but he stuck to it bravely, and somehow managed each time to regain his feet and struggle on.

A ridge lay in front of them. They scrambled over it, and all of a sudden the terrible racket seemed to die away and the swinging floe to steady under their feet.

"Zere, I did tell you. Ve are all right," said Jean, triumphantly.

"About time, too. I'm blessed if I could have gone much farther," panted Monty. "But where have the brutes gone?"

"Ze ice is too thick for zem 'ere," Jean answered. "Zey know zat zey break zeir 'eads if zey try to butt here."

Monty turned and stood gazing at the strip of floe which they had just crossed. The whole of it was simply in fragments. It was broken to pieces, and through the cracks the sea-water was gushing and heaving in fountains.

"They've got our seal," cried Monty, angrily.

"Don't grouse, Monty," said Dick, drily. "Just be thankful they haven't got us, too."

"It vas a close shave," said Jean, gravely. "I told you zey was ze wolves of ze sea."

"Wolves crossed with elephants," growled Monty. "Heavens, Dick, I've heard of killer whales, but I always thought they killed other whales. I never knew they came out of the sea after people."

"Zey vill go anyvere," replied Jean, gravely. "Lucky it ees for men zat zey 'ave not got legs."

"Or wings," added Dick. He paused. "They

certainly are the most savage brutes I ever saw or heard of. I'm sorry for the poor seals."

"One of zem killers, he vill eat three seals for his breakfast," Jean told him. "But look! Zey 'ave seen us from ze ship. Zey send ze boat for us."

Sure enough a boat was coming off, but the man in charge was pulling for a spot on the edge of the ice-field, a long way off. Jean started towards it, and the boys followed him.

"I say, do they ever attack boats?" asked Monty, uncomfortably.

"I do not sink so," replied Jean. "I 'ave never 'eard of zat."

Apparently he was right. At any rate there was no more sign of the killers, and the party reached the ship in safety. Monty, for one, was very thankful to feel the firm planks of the *Penguin's* deck once more beneath his feet.

Monsieur Javelot came up full of excitement. "Ugh, but it was terrible!" he exclaimed. "My heart was in my mouth when I saw those monsters attacking you."

"It was entirely thanks to Jean that we got away from them, monsieur," replied Monty. "But all's well that ends well, and we're none the worse. I expect you got the biggest scare," he added, with his engaging grin.

"That is true. I was terribly frightened," replied Monsieur Javelot. "Do you know I actually ran across the deck."

"You couldn't have done that six weeks ago, monsieur."

"You are right. I am marvellously better. I do not know whether it is hope or whether it is the effects of the voyage and the change of air and scene, but I am mending. I am better than at any time since my accident. And I feel——" he paused and spoke more gravely—"I feel that the finding of Anton will make me quite well again."

Later Monty spoke to Dick. "Dick, the old gentleman really believes that he is going to get his son back."

Dick nodded gravely. "We must do our best."

"But do you think there is any chance? Honestly, Dick, do you?"

"I don't know, Monty. I don't know. But somehow Monsieur Javelot's faith makes me feel that it may be possible."

"I do hope so," said Monty. "If he is disappointed, if we don't find anything, I think it will kill the poor old dear."

Just then Jean came up to them. "Ze captain, 'e say ze glass fall," he announced. "If ze vind come, he break ze ice."

Monty whistled softly. "Let's hope the ice is the only thing it will break. I don't quite fancy the idea of a gale down in the middle of all this stuff."

But the barometer did not lie, and next morning,

early, Monty was roused by a roar only to be compared with that of heavy guns. Dressing quickly, he and Dick hurried on deck to be met with a blast that nearly took their breath away.

Great waves were dashing on the floe which was cracking with a noise resembling vast peals of thunder. Already the sea was full of masses of broken ice, and the *Penguin*, with steam up, was holding away from the edge of the floe, awaiting her chance to proceed southwards.

Monty felt a trifle nervous, but Captain Bates was cool enough, and Monty was encouraged by his example. All day the gale blew furiously, and by ten at night, when the wind began to fall, the great ice sheet was broken everywhere, and the long lanes of open water pierced it in every direction.

The skipper lost no time in pushing the *Penguin* straight through the barrier. By morning they were in clear water again, and then were able to hoist sails and speed southwards before a favouring breeze.

Day after day they had fine weather and a favouring breeze, while, though they constantly saw huge icebergs, they met no more large sheets of floe ice.

"I never saw these seas so clear," Bates told them. "It's the biggest luck we've ever had. There must be a good fairy at our tow rope."

As they sailed farther and farther south the days grew longer, until at last there was no

darkness at all, and at midnight the sun still showed red just above the southern horizon. But in spite of the long day, it grew very cold, and the boys were only too glad of the warm woollens which they had laid in when in London.

At last, three weeks after sighting the first berg, they came on deck one morning to see the horizon bounded by a tremendous wall of ice.

Captain Bates called them on to the bridge. "There," he said, as he pointed, "you're looking at what mighty few men in this world have ever seen. That is the great Ice Barrier, the edge of the Antarctic Continent."

Monty was breathless with excitement, and Dick, in his quiet way, was equally impressed.

"Where are we going to land?" demanded Monty, eagerly.

The skipper smiled and shook his head. "That I can't tell you. We are within twenty miles of the place where the Delange Expedition landed, but it does not follow that we can land at the same spot. The ice in the Antarctic, just as in the North, is shrinking, and a spot where you can land one year may be sheer cliff a year or two later. However, we shall know more about it before nightfall."

After a while Dick went down to breakfast, but nothing would induce Monty to leave the bridge.

Every minute the great ice wall grew clearer. It was a lovely day, with brilliant sun, and the

rays reflected from the ice dazzled the eyes. As the ship came nearer the scene became fairy-like. The cliffs, sheer blue ice, towered in many places two hundred feet or more above the floe ice at their foot, and they were full of great hollows where the shadows lay azure and purple. Immense icicles hung from the cornices, sparkling like diamonds.

A few seals lay upon the floes, and skuas and snow petrels were seen. In the open water big whales rose, blowing spouts of vapour from their nostrils. These were what interested Captain Bates more than anything else.

"Never saw such a lot," he said, "or so tame. Why, bless me, there's a fortune in sight, in blubber alone!"

Picking their way through much floating ice, some of it towering bergs, about ten in the morning they reached a large semicircular bay which cut three miles or more into the Antarctic Continent. Behind it were blunt mountains rising two or three thousand feet against the pure cold blue of the sky.

"This is Delange Bay," announced the skipper, and putting his glasses to his eyes, carefully examined the shore.

Monty watched him with breathless interest.

"Yes," said the captain at last. "I think I see a possible landing-place."

"Hurrah!" cried Monty. "Our luck holds." Just as he spoke Dick came up. He was dusty

and dirty, and there was a very grave look on his good-looking face.

"I'm not so sure about that, Monty," he said gravely.

"Why, what's the matter?" cried Monty.

"I have been down in the hold," said Dick, "and I have just made the unpleasant discovery that some one has tampered with the petrol. I have opened a number of tins to find them filled, not with petrol, but water."

CHAPTER X

MONTY GOES GUNNING

"HAVE you told any one?" demanded Captain Bates, curtly.

"Only Monsieur Javelot."

"Then tell nobody else," ordered the skipper.

"And what does Monsieur Javelot think?" he added.

"That it is the work of that half-brother of his," replied Dick, gravely.

Bates nodded. He had, of course, already heard all about André Tissot, the scoundrelly half-brother of Monsieur Javelot, who had tried to stop the expedition. "It seems likely," he answered in a low voice, "though how he could have managed it is a bit hard to say."

"Do you think he could possibly have bribed any of the crew?" cut in Monty, quickly.

"You have put my thoughts into words," said the captain. "That is what we must find out. We must also find out whether all the petrol tins have been treated in the same way."

"We had better do that at once," said Monty. "If we have no petrol it is no use even landing. Come on, Dick"

The two brothers hurried off, and with Jean's

help set to ferreting out all the cases of petrol which were stored in the forehold. Case after case was opened, and their faces grew longer as they found that all had been treated in a similar fashion. They held water instead of petrol.

Just as they were beginning to despair they came upon some steel drums, and it was with shaking hands that Monty unscrewed the cap from the first of these. An unmistakable odour of petrol arose, and Monty quickly dipped out some of the contents into a tin, and carrying it to a safe spot, put a match to it.

To his intense relief it blazed up, and further tests showed that it was good petrol. Soon they were certain that the drums at least had not been tampered with, and both sighed with relief.

But Dick was not happy. "We have only enough for a flight of three or four hundred miles," he said, "instead of at least two thousand. It's a bad job, Monty."

But Monty refused to be downhearted. "The place isn't more than two hundred miles inland, and we shall spot it by the smoke. Don't you worry, Dick. We shall be all right."

They went and told Monsieur Javelot, and though he had been much upset by Dick's first discovery, he quickly regained his spirits. "We shall have enough," he declared. "It will be all right. Something tells me so." Then suddenly he stopped and frowned heavily.

"What's the matter?" asked Monty.

"I was thinking of André. I was regretting that I have no means of stopping his allowance," replied Monsieur Javelot.

Monty laughed outright. "Don't let that bother you, monsieur. Dick and I will square with him when we get home again. Now we will go and tell Captain Bates."

The skipper was greatly relieved at their news, and at once pushed forward preparations for landing. The sea was calm, the glass high, and, best luck of all, the sea fairly clear of ice. It did not take long to work the ship close to the edge of the shore ice, and at once the whale-boat was lowered.

Captain Bates himself got into this, and with the boys and Monsieur Javelot, pulled towards the ice. They found a little natural dock in the edge of the ice, and here were able to land without trouble. Crossing the shore ice, they saw bare cliff ahead, but at the bottom of this was a deep "tide crack," which cut them off from the shore. A crack of this kind is always found between shore ice and the actual land. Across this they made a bridge with some of the floor planks of the boat, and so Monsieur Javelot was able to cross.

The bluff beyond was not more than a dozen feet high, and though very steep, they were able to haul the lame man up. The moment they got to the top their noses were greeted with a sharp, pungent odour, and their ears with a chorus of

squawks. On a broad ledge was a large rookery of penguins. All stopped and stared.

"Did you ever see such rum beggars?" exclaimed Monty. "Why, they're not a bit afraid of us."

"They never are," said Bates. "In fact, they're chummy little chaps. Sometimes they'll come right up to you and take hold of your trousers. But look out for your fingers, boys. Their beaks are pretty sharp."

"I've been reading about them in Shackleton's book," said Dick. "I believe they are nearer human beings than any other birds in the world. At any rate, they are the only creatures, besides man, that show altruism."

"What's altruism?" demanded Bates, bluntly.

"Unselfishness. For instance, when one of the young gets away from its mother in a storm, another mother bird will look after it until the storm is over."

Bates looked interested. "I'll allow that's queer," he said. "I'm pretty sure there's no other bird will do that."

The penguins were so interesting they could not tear themselves away. There were hundreds of them, and hundreds of young as well. The nests were made of stones, and in each were two young, tiny, downy, little chaps, with flipper-like wings. One of the old ones stayed with the young—never moving away; the other was busy fetching food from the sea.

When one arrived with food it opened its beak wide, and the chick fed from its parent's open mouth. It was a very pretty sight, yet had its ugly side. Overhead swooped big birds, whose long, scissor-like wings flashed like snow in the sunshine. Suddenly one of these swooped down upon an outlying nest, and rose again with a young penguin, newly hatched, in its beak.

"The brute!" cried Monty, and impulsively flinging his gun to his shoulder, fired. Down came the robber, a great skua gull, and with the report the whole rookery became full of clamour.

"Take you all your time if you're going to keep that up, Monty," said the skipper, drily. "I reckon those skuas get twenty or thirty young 'uns every day."

"Well, I've stopped one of 'em," growled Monty, "and I hope I'll kill a few more before I get through."

As he spoke he went forward to pick up the gull. It was dead enough, but so, alas! was the penguin chick.

Monty looked up at the skuas still wheeling in the distance. "You brutes!" he said, viciously. "I'll make you pay for this."

But there was other work to do, and Bates called him away. They had to find a site for a hut, and then to land the material for the hut and stores.

There was no difficulty about the former job, for they very soon hit on a spot where a bluff

protected them from the prevailing south-easterly wind, and where the ground was level enough for the purpose.

This settled, the ship was warped in and attached to the bay ice, and then began the unloading of cargo. It was tremendously hard work, for since the weather might change at any time, haste was essential.

First, they got out the material for the hut, and for the hangar, then the food, blankets and tents, and while some went on with the unloading, others busied themselves with the building. The next thing was to get the hangar up, for until this was done they could not land the *Falcon*, and the hangar had to be strong to withstand the tremendous gales which blow in these regions.

The boys worked with the best, and Monty especially seemed tireless. Even when work was over for the day he would always go and visit the rookery. What was more, he invariably took his gun, and generally killed a skua or two. The penguins seemed to recognize him as a friend, and gave up making a fuss when the gun was fired.

A fortnight passed, and still the weather held, and by this time most of the stuff was safe ashore. Then one evening, as usual, Monty went up to the rookery. After a while the others heard him shoot, then a few minutes later he came tearing across the shore ice towards the ship.

"What's up?" called out Dick, who happened to be on deck.

“Look what I’ve found,” cried Monty, in breathless excitement, as he came scrambling aboard, and Dick saw that he had in his hand a small roll of something tied up carefully with a thread of white cottony string.

“I found this tied round the neck of a skua I shot,” he explained, eagerly. “It’s a message, I believe. Here, come down to the cabin and let’s open it.”

CHAPTER XI

READING THE MESSAGE

IN the cabin a dozen people crowded round Monty. There was Monsieur Javelot, pale with excitement ; Captain Bates, his red face redder than usual ; and Dick, with tightly compressed lips.

The packet was soaked with water, and Monty had to use the greatest care in opening it. They all watched him as he clipped the bindings away with a small pair of scissors, and very slowly and carefully spread out the contents. Outside was a covering of waterproof stuff, but age or wear had left it no longer proof, and the piece of cotton cloth inside, which looked like part of a handkerchief, was badly stained.

Monty unrolled this, and in the centre was a square of paper rolled up. This, like the cloth, was in a soaked condition, and almost falling to pieces.

"If there's writing on it, it won't be readable, I'm afraid," said Dick in Monty's ear.

Monty did not answer. He was busy unfolding the scrap of paper and spreading it flat on a sheet of fresh white blotting-paper.

"There is writing on it," he announced. "Bring a light, some one, please. It's too dark to see properly."

A lamp was brought at once, and now they were all able to see that the paper was a ruled sheet torn from a notebook, and had on it words written in pencil. But the wet had got at it, and the paper was so stained that the message was quite illegible.

They bent over it eagerly, trying to make something of it.

"Cannot you read it at all?" asked Monsieur Javelot in a voice that shook with anxiety.

Monty looked up. "I'm afraid it's nearly all gone, monsieur; still, there's a few words here and there. I must dry it first over the stove, then I'll copy out what I can."

He went off to the galley while the others waited. They were all intensely interested. Monsieur Javelot made certain that the message must be from his son, but the rest were doubtful. In fact, though none of them had ever said so, there was only one person in the ship besides his father who really believed it possible that Anton could ever have survived. That was Monty. In his case, though his reason told him that it was impossible, the simple, intense faith of Monsieur Javelot himself had ended by convincing him that somehow, somewhere, the old man's son still lived.

At last Monty was back.

"What have you found?" demanded Monsieur Javelot in shaking tones.

Monty laid the dried sheet on the table. "It is from Anton," he said in a clear voice.

"I knew it!" cried the old man. "I was sure of it."

"But wait," said Monty. "You must not be disappointed. Although it is signed by him, there is no message—only a few words which mean nothing."

"What does it matter?" demanded Monsieur Javelot. "The mere fact that the message was written by Anton is proof that he has survived. Let me see. I know his writing. I feel certain that I can make something of it."

There was silence in the warm, brightly-lighted cabin as Anton's father examined the yellow, discoloured sheet.

"Cet oiseau," he murmured. Then a pause—"profond—yes, and his signature." He raised his head at last. "It is true. There is little legible even to my eyes. Yet he writes of 'this bird' which, no doubt, is the one which he captured in order to tie to its neck the message. There is his signature, too, and above all, the date, October 10, which shows that he was alive on that day."

"Yes, but was it this year or last?" questioned Captain Bates.

Monsieur Javelot started and a look of alarm crossed his sensitive face. It was Monty who answered. "It was this year, sir."

"How do you know, Monty?"

"Because the bird that carried it was a young one."

Bates nodded. "You've got eyes, boy," he said, approvingly.

As for Monsieur Javelot, he was beaming. "Then my dear son is alive," he said, triumphantly.

Captain Bates nodded again. "I'll allow it sounds mighty like it," he answered. "If he was alive a month ago, there isn't no reason why he shouldn't be alive now. I congratulate you, monsieur."

Monsieur Javelot's worn face fairly glowed. He looked as if ten years had suddenly been struck off his age.

Monty was the next to speak.

"That word *profond*, Monsieur Javelot. It means 'deep'?"

"Yes, a great depth. It bears out the story of the Count. I feel sure that in some way Anton has reached the depths of some great valley where he has managed to sustain life. Now, my boys, it is your task to find this valley and to bring my son back to me."

Dick looked up from the message which he had been studying.

"We will do our best, monsieur," he said, in his quiet, steady voice. "I think we shall be able to start in a very few days."

"The hangar is almost finished," put in Monty. "When it is done, another two days ought to see the *Falcon* ready."

"I know that you will not waste an un-

necessary hour," said Monsieur Javelot, gratefully.

"And now I think that we had better clear the cabin," suggested Captain Bates. "Brown says that supper is waiting."

Brown, the steward, was a stunted, red-moustached man with a freckled face and sandy hair. For some minutes he had been waiting at the door, with a tablecloth over his arm. Now, as the party complied with the skipper's suggestion and cleared out, he came in and began deftly laying the table.

Monty stood watching him a moment, and Brown saw him. "It was good news for Monsieur Javelot, sir," he said, respectfully.

"Very good," replied Monty.

"Then you and Mr. Dick will start perhaps on Saturday?" questioned the man.

"I can't say what day we can be ready," replied Monty. "But we shall go as soon as possible."

"Just you and Mr. Dick?" inquired the man.

Monty looked at him rather sharply. "We have not decided yet. Perhaps you would like to come, Brown?" he added, suddenly.

"Me! But no!" the steward exclaimed, quickly.

As Monty walked slowly away to the cabin shared by himself and Dick there was a very thoughtful expression on his face. "If that fellow's name is really Brown, I'm a Dutchman," he murmured to himself.

He pulled up short.

"Shall I tell Dick?" he questioned. He shook

his head. "No, I'll wait a bit. But, by Jove, I mean to keep my eyes open."

The next few days were one rush, every one working against time. It was not only that all were eager to get the *Falcon* ready for her trip, but also that Captain Bates, who knew these latitudes better than most men, felt certain that the fine weather could not last much longer. And if a gale should blow up, the ship was in a most dangerous position. At the first sign of bad weather she would have to cast off from the ice-foot and make out to sea, to wait there perhaps for days until calm should come again.

It was on Wednesday that Monty had shot the skua gull, and by Friday evening the hangar was finished. The roof was stayed with wire ropes which were attached to huge boulders. Every precaution was taken to make all secure, and even Dick could find no fault with the building in which he was to house his beloved *Falcon*.

Once the hangar was ready it did not take long to get the aeroplane herself ashore. She had, of course, been taken to pieces, and each section carefully packed. Dick saw to getting the cases up from the hold, Monty went ashore with each one separately. By dinner-time on Saturday all were safe in the hangar.

"Lock the door, Dick," said Monty.

Dick did so, then to his surprise he saw Monty take a lead seal and deliberately pinch it on to the big padlock.

"You're not taking any chances, Monty?" he remarked.

"You bet I'm not," replied Monty, emphatically. "Have you forgotten those petrol tins?"

"Of course not, but have you any suspicion as to the chap who did it, Monty?"

"I think I have," replied Monty, cautiously. "No. I'm not going to say anything yet—not even to you. It's only the vaguest suspicion on my part, and I haven't an atom of proof."

"Well, sing out when you have," was all that Dick said, but he was looking rather more solemn than usual as he and Monty went aboard again.

Neither Dick nor Monty wasted much time over their dinner, and as soon as possible they were back at the hangar, where Jean Breguet found them.

He, too, noticed the seal. "You have ze suspicions," he said to Monty.

Monty nodded. "Have you any, Jean?" he asked.

"Not vat you could call ze suspicion. But I sink," replied Jean, rather grimly.

"All right. Don't say anything yet, but keep your eyes open. Is the rest of the petrol under guard?"

"It is locked in ze strong-room," replied Jean. "I sink anyone would have ze big job to break in zere."

Dick cut in. "We shall have to get it ashore this afternoon," he said. "The glass has begun

to fall, and the chances are we shall get wind before morning. We must have everything we require ashore before dark, including petrol, oil, and all our stores."

"And then the ship will have to make out to sea?" said Monty.

"Yes, of course."

"Leaving us three behind?"

"I suppose so."

"Good!" replied Monty, with emphasis.

Dick looked a bit puzzled. "What do you mean, Monty?"

"Just what I say. I shall feel a jolly sight happier when we three are left to ourselves."

Dick shrugged his shoulders. "You're very mysterious, Monty."

"I don't mean to be, old man, but I give you my word it will be a relief to my mind when the ship has shifted. I don't mind telling you I've hardly slept the last three nights."

"Nor me, monsieur," added Jean.

Monty smiled. "I believe you and I are on the same trail, Jean."

"I sink we are, monsieur. Vas it you I 'ave 'eard on ze Thursday night, down in ze forehold?"

"No, not me, Jean."

Jean frowned. "Zen it vas zat red 'eaded rascal!"

Dick started, and turned to Monty. "Do you suspect Brown?"

“The cat is out of the bag, Dick, Yes, I do. What about you, Jean?”

Jean shrugged his shoulders in true French fashion. “I do not sink zat vas hees real name at all.”

“No more do I. I’m willing to bet he’s a Frenchman,” said Monty. “And if my suspicions are right, he’s the swab who monkeyed with our petrol.”

“Then you think he’s in the pay of Tissot?”

“That’s the only conclusion I can possibly come to,” Monty answered.

Dick looked very grave. “Then, I agree with you, Monty. The sooner the gale comes, the better.”

CHAPTER XII

THE START

THE gale came all right, and with a fury that was an eye opener to the boys. But luckily it did not break till nearly midnight, and before it began everything necessary was ashore, including the petrol and oil. The latter were both stored in the hangar, and so were the other stores.

For the shore party a tent had been erected. A tent sounds a poor sort of shelter against an Antarctic blizzard, but it must be remembered that Captain Scott and Shackleton weathered out the most fearful storms in a small tent, and that at a height of more than ten thousand feet above sea level. This tent which had been put up for the boys and Jean Breguet was quite a luxurious affair, comparatively speaking. It had a double skin, and was erected under lee of the same rocks which sheltered the hangar.

It was about half-past ten that the *Penguin's* moorings were released, and she began to move out from the dangerous neighbourhood of the shore ice. Before she left Captain Bates had had a talk with Dick and Monty, and had particularly asked them if they would like a fourth man to remain ashore with them.

But they and Jean had already discussed this point, and decided that they would do better by themselves. The *Falcon* would carry four people, but not five, and if they did find Anton she would have a full load on her return. So in the end the three only were left, and the last they saw of the *Penguin* and her people was Monsieur Javelot standing in the stern and waving his hand to them. He himself had longed to stay ashore, but lame as he still was, knew that he could be of no help, but on the contrary would need waiting on. So all he could do was to give the boys his heartfelt good wishes, and watch them with longing eyes as the ship drove steadily out to sea.

Late as it was, it was still broad daylight, for now, towards the end of November, it was approaching midsummer, and the sun did not set at all. But the sky was heavy with clouds, while a chill mist drove across the tumbling waters, and presently the stout form of the *Penguin* disappeared from view, and the three went, shivering, back to their tent. The oil stove was soon lighted and the temperature rose rapidly.

Monty dropped on a camp stool with a sigh of relief. "Thanks be, we're safe for a bit," he said.

"Brown, you mean?" questioned Dick.

"That's it. I'm nearly sure now, Dick. I've been watching him. He's not English."

"Zat is so," growled Jean. "He talk well, but not quite ze English."

"So you noticed that?" exclaimed Monty.

"And I notice something else," said Jean, with a nod. "Zat moustache ees not—vat you call him—proper."

"Proper," repeated Monty. "Oh, you mean propre, 'his own.' A sham, was it?"

Jean nodded again. "Zat is vat I do mean."

"Did he try to do any more mischief?" questioned Dick.

"Not that I know of," replied Monty, "but I tell you I watched him hard."

"Well, he won't do any now. That's one good thing," said Dick. "And now what about a snooze? We've got a big day before us to-morrow."

As he spoke, a gust swept over with a screaming yell that was like nothing earthly.

"I don't mind trying," said Monty, drily, "but it would be easier to sleep in a menagerie full of tigers."

"It certainly does blow," allowed Dick.

Jean smiled. "You wait. Eet vill be vorse before it is better." As he spoke he opened his sleeping bag and crawled into it. "Good night, messieurs," he said, and closing his eyes, seemed to be asleep in a minute.

The boys also got into their bags, and very snug and comfy they found them. Although nearly midsummer by the calendar, this gale, blowing right off the gigantic ice-cap which

covers the whole continent of Antarctica, was cold as death.

Monty got off to sleep, but only to be wakened in a short time by the shriek of a wind so terrific that it seemed to him as though it would not only take the tent away, but even the solid rock on which it rested. He had never conceived that mere air in motion could make such an appalling din.

He sat up, and at once saw that Dick, too, was awake, and in the act of climbing out of his bag. Dick put his lips close to Monty's ear. "It's the hangar I'm scared about," he said.

Monty nodded. "Let's look!" he replied, and the two set to opening the tent flap which had been carefully laced up. Monty got out first, but the moment he stood up he was instantly blown off his legs and left wallowing in the snow. Dick crawled towards him on all fours, and with difficulty got hold of him, and dragged him back into the tent.

"The hangar's all right so far," panted Monty, as soon as he got breath to speak.

"If it goes we can't do anything," replied Dick. "It and the 'plane would be a mile away before we could even get outside the tent."

Monty shrugged his shoulders. "Then the only thing is to sit tight and hope for the best," he answered. His voice was drowned in the incredible uproar of a fresh blast, and he and Dick sat, grave-faced and silent, until this had gone yelling out to sea. Then Monty spoke

again. "This is pretty bad for the *Penguin*, Dick," he said gravely.

"She's stout, and Bates knows her," replied Dick in his quiet way. "It's not a bit of use worrying, old chap."

This Monty knew as well as his brother, yet all the same neither of them slept again that night.

At breakfast time it was still blowing as hard as ever. The sky was clear, but a drift of fine snow blown from the high ground inland had already piled feet deep in the hollow where they were camped. It was still drifting, forming a silver haze which shone weirdly in the pale sunlight. They tried to get out and across to the hangar, but though the distance was only a few yards, it was out of the question. There was nothing for it but to wait as patiently as might be until the gale blew itself out.

At midday it was still blowing hard, at night the same. It was not until Sunday evening that the storm at last dropped, and their aneroid began to rise.

The first thing the boys did when they got outside was to see whether the hangar was safe. To their great relief they found it still sound, but the doors so drifted up with snow that it would be some hours' work to clear them. Then they climbed the high ground, from which they could get a view of the sea.

The great gale had cleared a deal of the floating

ice and broken much of the ice-foot. In the heavy sea that was still running, quantities of small broken stuff tossed and glittered, and further out some big bergs sailed majestically. But of the *Penguin* there was no sign at all.

"I expect the skipper took her right out to sea," said Monty, sagely. "It'll take her some time to get back."

"Well, there's plenty," replied Dick. "We can't get off for another three days at the best."

Monty turned back down the hill. "We'll clear the door at once," he said. "Then we shall be ready to start putting the 'bus together first thing to-morrow morning."

Next day dawned brilliantly fine and calm, and all three set to work on the task of setting up the *Falcon*. By Tuesday night they had finished, and the big 'plane was ready to the last nut, bolt, and stay. The petrol tanks were filled, and the oil tank also. Owing to the cold the oil was thick and gummy, but Dick said it did not matter—that as soon as she was started the heat of the big engine would put that all right.

It was now three days since the *Penguin* had left, and though twice a day one of the three had been up the hill with the glasses they had not seen a sign of her. Monty and Dick were both uneasy, but Jean assured them that it might easily be a week before the ship could work back into the bay. So on that Tuesday night they

talked things over and decided not to wait, but to take advantage of the fine weather and start at once. Next morning the sea was still clear of everything except ice. They breakfasted quickly, and after a final inspection of the *Falcon* wheeled her out into the open, and climbed aboard.

Dick surveyed the short stretch of smooth hard snow between the 'plane and the edge of the bluff. "Not too much room," he said, critically. "But we must chance that." He pressed the self-starter, and the great engine burst into roaring life, sending echoes thundering along the lonely ice cliffs, and driving the skuas in screaming terror out to sea.

CHAPTER XIII

THE WHIRLSTORM

THE *Falcon* dashed forward ; Dick pulled back the control. Her rubber-shod wheels spun upon the frozen snow, and for a second she seemed to check.

A moment of the most fearful anxiety, for if the great 'plane failed to rise she would inevitably smash herself against the ice-clad rocks which bounded the little plateau. Then suddenly she took off, and so suddenly that Monty, who was standing up peering out of the window, was flung backwards.

But he recovered his balance at once.

"It's all right," he shouted, triumphantly. "She'll do it."

Up she went, just skimming the rim of the rocks, and once clear of them her speed increased, and she rose at an amazing pace. Monty, looking down, saw her shadow, as black as ink, flitting, cloud-like, across the snow-clad surface of the great slope that rose inland.

Up and up, and with every moment the cold increased. Then Dick swung her and she rose in great spirals towards the cold blue of the Antarctic sky. Within a very few moments the whole of

her, with the exception of the engine casing, was covered with white rime, but, inside, the electric heating apparatus kept the cabin quite comfortable.

Dick beckoned to Monty, who stepped across to him. "I'm going high," he told him. "I want to be quite clear of the inland mountains. Besides, there's just a chance we might get a glimpse of the *Penguin*."

Monty nodded, and returned to his station by the window. Jean Breguet was seated by the other window. His swarthy face was a little pale, but otherwise he showed no sign of excitement.

As they rose, the horizon widened, and soon an enormous area of land and sea lay beneath them. The glass of the windows being coated with a special preparation, no frost formed upon them, and Monty was able to see unhindered. His eyes were fixed upon the sea, watching eagerly for some sign of the ship. He glanced aside at the barograph, and saw that they had passed the six thousand feet mark.

Again his sight went seaward, and all of a sudden he snatched up his field-glasses and quickly focused them.

Then he sprang across to his brother. "It's all right, Dick," he said, joyfully. "The *Penguin* is safe."

Dick breathed a sigh of relief. "By Jove, I'm glad. I say, do you think they'll see us?"

"They may, but, of course, we're not to be

spotted so easily as a ship, and I should think they are nearly thirty miles away."

"Wonder if I'd better fly out over them," suggested Dick, but Monty shook his head.

"I wouldn't, old man. We'd best make the most of this weather. You never can tell when it will change, and we've got a goodish way to go."

"Bah, it's only about two hundred miles," returned Dick. "Nothing to the *Falcon*."

"Not so long as it doesn't blow," agreed Monty, "but think what would happen if we got another gale like the last."

Dick agreed that Monty was probably right, but suggested that he might let off a smoke rocket in the hope of attracting the attention of the people in the *Penguin*.

This Monty did, and presently, as he watched the distant *Penguin*, saw a faint white puff of smoke appear at her side. "It's all right," he told his brother, gleefully. "They've spotted us. I saw the smoke from their gun."

"Good business!" said Dick. "Then we'll push on inland. Let's see"—as he consulted the map—"just east of south. That's our direction."

Turning again, he sent the 'plane inland towards the rounded summits of the coast range. High as the *Falcon* was above the sea, she was still a long way below the level of these towering mountains. Down dropped the needle of the barograph,

recording successively eight—nine—ten and eleven thousand feet.

At twelve thousand the mountains were immediately and only a few hundred feet below. The *Falcon* coursed swiftly over them, and Monty, looking out, saw outstretched beneath them a snow-field stretching endlessly away towards the south and rising, fifty miles farther on, to a second range of mountains which appeared to be nearly double the height of those they had already crossed. They towered in solemn grandeur against the pale sky, and Monty, watching them, realized with a feeling of awe that no human foot had ever or probably ever would rest upon their gigantic summits.

To the east the mighty range broke down into a great gap, and it was for this that Dick headed the 'plane. Through this gap or pass Anton Javelot and his companions had climbed slowly and painfully to reach the unknown plateau which lay behind the range.

Monty, looking down at the enormous wastes of snow, shivered slightly as he tried to realize the terrible toil of marching day by day over that bleak and lifeless waste, carrying or dragging everything that made life possible, and always at the mercy of the frightful blizzards, which at any time, and with hardly any notice, would come sweeping out of the south. He contrasted it with the enormous speed and comfort with which he and his companions were sweeping forward into

the unknown, then shuddered again as he realized how absolutely dependent they were upon the mechanism of the great 'plane.

If anything went wrong and they were forced to land, they would have nothing to trust to but their own muscles to get them back to the coast, and each quarter of an hour was taking them a long day's journey farther from the ship and safety.

Monty was roused from his thoughts by a sharp signal from Dick. He stepped across and put his ear close to Dick's lips. "There's something wrong," said Dick.

Monty started, sharply. Dick's words were like an echo of his own thoughts. "What—in the engine?" he questioned.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. It sounds like the cylinders. The note is wrong."

"Can they have been tampered with?" he asked.

"I don't think it's possible. The seals on the packing cases were intact."

Monty considered. "Had we better go back?" he inquired.

"I hardly know. We're already more than half-way there."

"She seems to be flying all right," said Monty.

"She is, but I can't say how long she'll stick

it. There's a sort of grinding. Can't you hear it ? ”

“ Perhaps the oil is freezing up,” suggested Monty. “ The cold outside is simply terrific.”

“ Get at the oil pump, and see what you can do,” Dick told him.

Monty knew enough of the mechanism of the 'plane to do this, and Jean, to whom he explained things, helped him. So far as they could see, the oil was flowing quite freely. Monty told Dick.

“ I think we'll carry on,” said Dick, but his face was anxious.

By this time they were very near the great gap in the mountains. It was a terrific gorge, perhaps two miles wide at the top, but fully a mile deep, so that it gave the impression of being quite narrow.

“ I won't try to go over the top,” said Dick. “ It'll save a bit if I take her through.”

So like a vast bird, the *Falcon* began to wing her way through the gigantic crack. As she turned into it they felt her whole frame quiver, and knew that they were facing a tremendous air draught which poured through the gap.

And now even Monty could hear the ominous grinding sound which came from some part of the machinery. Progress was slower. From her normal eighty miles an hour the 'plane had dropped to barely fifty. Even so, she covered space at a great rate, and it was not more than five or six minutes before she was through the gap. Now

she was above the great central plateau of the Antarctic Continent, a tableland nearly as large as all Europe, a gigantic waste covered with ice many hundreds or even thousands of feet thick.

Monty looked at the map with which Count Delange himself had supplied them. "Yes, Dick," he said, "we're pretty near the spot where they stopped, and Anton went on—and—and—oh, by jove. There's the smoke!"

He pointed as he spoke, and sure enough there was a long bar of smoke or mist lying all across the ice.

At this moment Jean touched Monty on the shoulder and led the way to the stern window of the cabin and pointed. And what Monty saw was so paralysing that for a moment he simply stood and stared, unable to speak or even move.

CHAPTER XIV

OVER THE EDGE

ON the southern flank of the great mountain range which they had just crossed rose a monstrous white giant. Broad at the base, it tapered in the centre, and its head was lost in a great pale cloud. And this dreadful thing, Monty saw, was rushing towards them at a speed which even the *Falcon* could not approach.

“W—what is it?” gasped Monty.

“It ees a spout—a snow spout,” answered Jean.

Then Monty understood. This was a snow tornado. He had heard of such things, but never believed in them. But here was the ghastly reality, and at once he saw that if this terror overtook the *Falcon* she would be whirled away like dust in a desert storm, and she and everything in her destroyed.

“Drive her! Drive her!” he cried. “It’s our only chance.”

The note of the great engines rose a tone higher, and although that ugly grinding sound was still only too plain, the wonderful machine responded to Dick’s touch, and the *Falcon* darted forward at increased speed.

"Any chance of dodging it?" asked Dick, shouting to make himself heard above the tremendous roar of the exhaust.

"No good trying," Monty answered quickly. "The spout, or whatever it is, is jumping all over the shop. Make straight for the valley. That seems our best chance."

"A pretty slim one," murmured Dick, but Monty did not catch the words. He was back at the stern window, watching the amazing freaks of the spinning storm behind them. The thing was now so much nearer that Monty was better able to realize its vast height and size. It had the appearance of being possessed of some uncanny intelligence, for though the *Falcon* had swerved somewhat to the south and away from the mountains, the tornado was following her.

Not that it followed steadily. Its progress was by a series of gigantic leaps and bounds. At one moment its base was down on the ice cap, tearing up fresh supplies of hard-frozen snow; at another it was hundreds of feet up in the air. And so it danced and reeled drunkenly across the white desert, yet always with the same hideous appearance of chasing the intruders upon its frozen domain.

Whatever sound it made was completely drowned by the thunder of the driven engines of the 'plane, and its seeming silence added to the weirdness of its amazing antics.

Even as Monty watched, the spout made a

fresh leap of perhaps two or three miles, all in a matter of seconds, and his heart was in his mouth as he felt that the *Falcon* could never escape its terrible pursuer.

But Dick, too, was watching, and he swung the *Falcon* still farther to the south, and she, now travelling at more than a mile a minute, was rapidly nearing the strange fog mist which lay like a barrier for many miles across the lonely ice.

Monty stared hard at this low-lying mist, but it was quite impenetrable. He could see nothing through it, and giving it up as hopeless, turned once more to watch the tornado.

The hideous thing was no more than a mile or so away, and already the *Falcon* rocked in the great air waves which surrounded it. At such close quarters Monty could plainly perceive its gigantic size and the frightful force of its spin. For the moment it was bearing at right angles to the *Falcon's* course, but from what he had seen already, Monty knew that at any minute it might swerve and leap upon them like a tiger on its prey.

Dick saw this, too, and swung away still farther to the right. As he did so the snow spout, as if endowed with some infernal intelligence, swung too. The *Falcon* quivered as though a gigantic fist had struck her, and at the same moment her engines suddenly ceased to work.

Monty drew one quick breath. They were

done for now. There was not one chance in a thousand that they could escape annihilation, for even if Dick succeeded in making a landing in the snow, it was all odds that the whirlwind would catch them there, and carry them, the *Falcon* and all, away like specks of dust.

Already Dick had done the only thing possible, and started a volplane downwards. Monty did not notice where the *Falcon* was heading. For the life of him he could not take his eyes off the spinning terror which chased them. And now that the roar of the engines had ceased, the sound of it filled the whole interior of the cabin with a deep thunder which was terrifying to the last degree.

But now the tornado was not travelling so fast as it had been. So, at least, it seemed to Monty. Also it had once more changed its course slightly, and was apparently moving parallel to the great fog bank which was just in front of them. Next moment the *Falcon* was actually between it and the fog.

"Turn her, Dick!" cried Monty, sharply. "Swing her to the left."

But Dick, who, all through these last nerve-racking minutes, had kept his head most admirably, had already done so.

"Ze fog, she vill save us!" said Jean in Monty's ear.

Monty did not answer. His whole being was concentrated on the white giant, which was so

terribly close, and he was praying desperately that it would keep on its present course. If it did so, there seemed still some faint hope that they might escape.

The seconds dragged like minutes while the *Falcon*, travelling at terrific speed, shot forwards and downwards.

"Oh!" The exclamation was wrung from Monty. "Oh, look!"

The white giant had suddenly turned again, but at a half right-angle. It rushed furiously upon the bank of vapour, and for an awful instant Monty fully believed that the end had come.

But no.

The terror missed them by half a mile, yet even so caught the *Falcon* a back-hander which tossed her over at a terrible angle. Yet Dick held her hard, and somehow she got back to an even keel.

Next moment Monty was witness of a most amazing sight. The snow tornado struck the fog bank, struck it and tore it to ribands. And as the mist shredded away before that fearful onset, Monty was conscious of depths beyond imagination, of a monstrous cliff going down—down interminably, of a chasm which apparently had no bottom.

As the tornado struck the mist it leapt as though terrified. All the bottom part of it seemed to break up and disappear. Its roaring became perceptibly fainter. Then, all of a sudden, the

whole thing went to pieces, and next instant such a snow-storm was falling into the chasm as Monty had never imagined—let alone seen.

“Ze fog, she ’ave saved us!” cried Jean.

Monty hardly heard. For now for the first time he realized that the *Falcon* had reached the edge of the chasm. More than reached it, for she was over it. “Look out, Dick!” he yelled. “Turn her!”

“I can’t,” replied Dick, simply. “It’s too late. The wind from the cyclone blew us forward, and now I have no lift left.”

Monty was silent. He was peering down, awe-stricken, into the appalling depths that yawned beneath. Not that he could see much, for beneath the mist rings hung like vast volumes of grey smoke. All that was visible was the near edge of the chasm, a sheer cliff rimmed with icicles of a size beyond anything that Monty could possibly have imagined.

Dick was right. That Monty could see plainly enough. The *Falcon* was over the edge, and without engine power there was no return. Dick was doing all he could to start up the engines afresh, but something was seriously wrong, for his efforts were in vain.

Dick swung her nose round at a right angle, and Monty realized that this was the best thing to do, for in this smother they could see nothing of the opposite side of the ravine, and if they hit it—well, there was an end of all things. By this

manceuvre he kept the cliff wall in sight, and with it as a landmark drove on downwards. For a moment or two Monty watched black crags and terraces flash past, then suddenly he flung up his head.

“Who cares?” he cried with a reckless laugh. “If Anton is alive at all he’s somewhere down below. And where he can live, so can we. Let her rip, Dick. Let’s see what’s at the bottom of this hole in the earth.”

CHAPTER XV

THE LANDING

So fascinated was Monty with his glimpses of the monstrous cliff past which the *Falcon* was diving, that he completely forgot the danger of the dive. Where they were going, what landing they might find, how they would ever get back again, these were questions which for the moment did not even occur to him.

As the big 'plane swept downwards the mist thinned, and her crew caught sight of gigantic terraces, huge outstanding pinnacles of rock, and the black mouths of gaping caves extending vaguely into the side of the great rift.

He heard an exclamation from Jean, and glanced at the man. He was standing with set face and wide eyes, staring out at the amazing panorama which flashed by.

The pace at which the *Falcon* planed down was so great, that it was not possible to get more than the merest glimpse of the marvels past which they shot. But the farther they went the clearer became the air, until there was no more than a faint haze around them.

"Shall we never get to the bottom?" Monty found himself saying. Then he pulled himself

together. "We must have come down a mile or more," he exclaimed.

"More zan zat," It was Jean who spoke. "Look at ze instrument."

Monty cast one quick glance at the barograph. From nearly twelve thousand feet the index had dropped until now it registered barely three thousand. And still they fell.

Monty moved across to Dick. "Where are we going to?" he asked.

"God knows," replied Dick, but he said the words quietly and reverently. And at that moment, as if in answer to Monty's question, the mist vanished. They had dropped beneath the pall.

"Look! Oh, look!" screamed Monty.

Dick and he stared together through the window, stared at a sight which certainly no man, even in his wildest dreams, could have imagined to exist in the heart of the great frozen Antarctic

Below—still a long way below—lay a level valley, a valley green with vegetation. Through the centre flowed a river winding in slow curves among the greenery, and on either side, perhaps three or four miles apart, the rock walls towered endlessly until they were lost in the mist.

Owing to this mist, the daylight which filtered down from above had a strange silvery quality which was quite unlike anything which the boys had ever before seen.

Dick breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks be, Monty, we can make a landing, anyhow."

Monty did not answer at once. Suddenly, just ahead, he had seen something moving against the green, a great shapeless bulk unlike any creature that he had ever set eyes on.

"Look out, Dick!" he said sharply. "There are animals of some sort down there."

Dick nodded. "I see it—yes, more than one. Get the rifles out, Monty. We must be ready in case we are attacked."

Monty flew to obey. The rifles were ready in their racks, and there was nothing to do but to get them down and load them, a matter of only a few moments.

Dick called out again. "What's this wall below us, Monty?"

Monty sprang across to the window. The plane was now within a few hundred feet of the ground, and almost immediately beneath was a wall of stone stretching completely across the valley, from one side to the other. It seemed to be of considerable height and very massive, but what its object was Monty could not conceive. But this much he did see, that on the far side of the wall the valley seemed empty of life, while on the near side there moved these great clumsy creatures which they had already noticed.

"Which side shall I go?" asked Dick. "I've still time to turn her."

"No," Monty answered quickly. "Carry on,

Dick. We shall be all the better off with that wall between us and the big beasts. I can't see a living thing on the far side."

"Right!" replied Dick, and let the 'plane swoop onwards in a straight line. His eyes were anxiously fixed on the valley floor below, looking for a good place to land. As every airman knows, landing a "lame duck" is not an easy job at the best of times.

Monty, staring downwards, had just time to notice that the surface on the far side of the wall looked rougher, and that the grass was coarser than on the near side, when the *Falcon's* wheels touched the ground, and she darted forward, bumping badly over a surface that was much rougher than could be seen from above.

Dick turned her just in time to save collision with a great ugly jag of rock that lay dead in their course, then her pace slackened, and she came to rest in the open, only about a hundred yards from the bank of the river.

"Hurrah!" cried Monty, in great delight. "Good for you, Dick! That was a topping landing." As he spoke he sprang for the door.

Dick stopped him. "Steady, Monty. We'll all go out together, if you please. Just remember that this is practically a new world, and that none of us has the faintest idea of the dangers we may meet with outside the 'plane."

Monty laughed. "Can't see anything that

would hurt a fly, Dick. Still, you're boss, and your orders go."

Dick got slowly out of his driving seat. He was stiff with the tremendous strain of the past three hours of flying.

Jean got out a thermos bottle and poured some of its steaming contents into a mug which he handed to Dick. "It is soup, monsieur. It vill do you good."

Dick sipped it gratefully. "It *is* good," he said. "But hadn't you chaps better have some? It's a precious long time since breakfast."

Monty, though desperately impatient to get out and explore this amazing valley, suddenly realized that he was somewhat shaky and very hungry. He took a cup of the soup, and a couple of biscuits which Jean forked out of a tin, and ate and drank quickly.

"You're right as usual, Dick," he said. "I feel a heap better, and ready to tackle all the wild beasts in Antarctica."

"Right, old chap," answered Dick. "Then take your rifle and come on. Jean, you will please stay with the 'plane. Whatever happens, we can't risk losing her."

"Vair good, monsieur," answered the Frenchman, and if he felt disappointed, he did not show it.

Each carrying a rifle, of which the magazine was full, and with spare clips of cartridges in their pockets, the brothers opened the door and stepped

out on to the grass-clad floor of the valley. "My goodness, it's warm!" exclaimed Monty, instantly.

He was right. The temperature was somewhere between fifty and sixty, and after the terrific chill of the upper atmosphere, the air here felt positively stifling.

"Better get rid of some of our clothes," said Dick, so they laid down their rifles, and shedding their heavy wool-lined coats, left them with Jean, and started again.

"I can't understand what makes it so warm," said Monty, in a puzzled tone.

"Hot springs or some sort of volcanic action," replied Dick. "That would cause the fog above us, and the fog preventing radiation keeps the heat in the valley." Almost as he spoke, Dick stepped on something which went off with a pop under his weight.

"Ah," he said, "a common or garden puff-ball. Just what one might expect in this damp warmth."

"There are heaps of them!" exclaimed Monty. "And, look! Did you ever see a fungus like that one before?"

He pointed to an amazing-looking growth resembling a mushroom, but of a vivid green colour, and quite a foot across. Dick examined it with interest. "No, it's a new species. We'll name it after you, Monty."

Monty grinned. "Dick, we're going to be frightfully celebrated people when we get home again."

Dick's face clouded slightly.

"When we get home," he repeated. "Yes, but shall we ever do so, Monty? You must remember that the *Falcon* is badly damaged, perhaps beyond repair."

But Monty refused to be discouraged. "Don't croak, Dick. We'll fix her up somehow. Our job now is to find Anton. When we've got him, we'll get back and report progress. After that we can fix up a big expedition and really explore this place properly."

While they talked, the two had been nearing the river, and now they stood on its bank.

It was a good-sized stream, nearly a hundred yards wide, greenish in colour, and apparently of considerable depth. The banks were low but steep, and in many places overhanging the water. Among the coarse grass which rimmed the banks grew innumerable mushrooms or toadstools, many of immense size.

Monty stood gazing down into the sullen-looking stream. The bank just here was very low, and Monty, flinging himself down on his face, stretched out a hand and touched the water.

"Why, it's quite warm!" he cried in amazement. "Feel, Dick!"

Dick stooped down and thrust his hand into the water. "Yes, must come from hot springs," he said, "but it's not too hot for fish. I wonder if there are any."

He broke off with a sharp cry, and to his horror

Monty saw that something which looked like a piece of reddish rope was coiled around his brother's wrist. "Help, Monty!" cried Dick. "Hang on to me. It's pulling me in."

CHAPTER XVI

THE INHABITANTS OF THE LEDGE

As always, Monty's wits worked quickest in any emergency. In a flash, he saw that neither his strength nor Dick's would be of any avail against the thing that was dragging Dick down. He snatched up his rifle, and thrusting the muzzle down close to the water, and within an inch or two of his brother's hand, pulled the trigger.

With the crash of the report, the water boiled and bubbled as if a mass of steam had been suddenly released from the surface, but almost instantly the red coil fell away from Dick's wrist.

He sprang to his feet. "Good for you, Monty!" he said in his quiet way. "I believe it was the only thing to do."

"Is your wrist hurt?" asked Monty, sharply.

"Feels a bit numb. Yes, and I've got a few small holes in it. But nothing much. Heavens, the brute had a grip!"

"What was it?"

"Something in the nature of an octopus, I fancy. I say, Monty, I hope we're not the wrong side of the wall."

"What do you mean, Dick?"

"Why, that wall looks as if it had been made



Monty snatched up his rifle, and thrusting the muzzle down close to the water, pulled the trigger.

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by men, and if so, it was certainly made for some purpose. Isn't it possible that it was meant to keep out whatever lives at this end of the valley ? ”

“ Perhaps the people live at this end, and built it to shut out the other,” suggested Monty.

“ No, I don't think that, and I'll tell you why. The grass looked better on the other side, and I'm sure I saw other walls dividing it up into enclosures. My belief is that those creatures, whatever they are, that were wandering about, are tame things.”

“ Sort of cattle, you mean ? ”

“ Something of the kind, though goodness knows they didn't look much like any cattle we have ever seen or heard of.”

“ I shouldn't think they did, but what are we going to do about it ? ”

“ My notion would be to go back to the 'plane,” said Dick, who was binding a handkerchief around his wrist, “ try and repair her, then fly her up the valley, and scout round to see where it will be best to land.”

Monty considered a bit. “ Perhaps you're right. Come on then. I certainly don't feel like messing about any more near this river. One of these blessed brutes might make up its mind to come out of the water after us.”

As if in answer to his words, there was a heavy splash in the centre of the stream, and both boys caught a glimpse of the black shiny body of a

large fish or reptile before it disappeared again amid the broken water.

"Plenty of life in there," said Dick.

Monty shuddered. "Nice place to go in bathing," he said. "Come on. We'll tackle the engine."

As they walked back to the spot where the *Falcon* lay, the eyes of both were busy roving all over the valley floor and the monstrous cliffs which bounded it on either side. It was the most uncanny sight, the way in which the cliffs soared up and up until lost in the haze overhead. It made Monty, at least, feel as though he were in prison and absolutely cut off from the rest of the world.

These cliffs were broken with all sorts of ledges and terraces, and at the bottom, on either side, lay monstrous piles of rock and rubble which in the course of ages had fallen from above.

"Seen anything, Monty?" asked Dick, curiously.

Monty was staring up at the opposite cliffs. "Yes," he said, slowly. "I'm pretty sure I do, but it's so far off I can't make it out. Look at that terrace up there, the big one where I'm pointing."

Dick, standing behind his brother, looked carefully in the direction indicated.

"Can you see what I mean?" questioned Monty.

"I do see something that seems to be moving,"

replied Dick, "but it's so misty up there I can't be sure what it is."

"Looks to me like a lot of monkeys," said Monty.

"Grey monkeys," repeated Dick. "Yes, that's as near it as I can make out. But they're too far off to be sure. Hurry back to the 'plane, and let's get the glasses."

But by the time they had got out a pair of field-glasses, and focused them, the monkeys, or whatever they had been, were no longer visible.

"We shall have to keep a smart look out, Monty," said Dick, gravely. "There seems to be plenty of life in this rift after all, and most of it dangerous." He turned to Jean, who was busy with the engine. "Have you any idea yet as to what the trouble is, Jean?"

"Not yet, monsieur. I sink ve must take down ze cylinders."

"All right. Where's a wrench? Let's get at it." Dick flung off his coat, and so did Monty. They slipped on overalls and set to work in earnest. Dick was an absolutely first-class mechanic, Jean was not far behind him, and Monty had had plenty of training during the period of the *Falcon's* construction. With all three at it, together, the great 500 h.p. engine of the *Falcon* soon began to separate out into its component parts.

Suddenly Dick gave a sharp exclamation. "Look at this bearing!" he said.

The others both looked, and an expression of utter dismay crossed Monty's face. "It's all scored," he cried. "It looks as if it had been running without oil."

"Worse almost than that," replied Dick. "There was plenty of oil, but the oil has been tampered with. It must have been full of grit."

"Grit!" echoed Monty. He shook his fist. "It's the work of that scoundrel Brown on the *Penguin*!" he cried.

"You are right, Monsieur Monty," said Jean, and his voice quivered with anger. "And I tell you zis. Eef evaire I catch ze man who did zis, I vill make heem dreenc zis oil, grit and all!"

Dick hardly noticed what the others said. He was gravely examining the damaged bearing, turning it over, and looking at it from every angle.

"Is it done for, Dick?" asked Monty, anxiously.

"Not quite, I think," replied Dick. "Badly damaged, of course, but if we have any good oil left, we might still contrive to fly her."

Monty plunged at once for the oil tank. But this oil, when examined, proved to be full of some gritty matter—apparently emery. It was marvellous that the *Falcon's* engine could have stood so long a flight when lubricated with nothing but this terrible mixture.

"Isn't there a spare can or two?" questioned Dick, anxiously.

"Zere vas four of zem," answered Jean, as

he pulled one out, and quickly unscrewed the cap. He poured a little of the oil on to the palm of his hand, and rubbed it with his forefinger. "Eet is all grit," he said with a groan.

So was the second can, but the third proved to be all right, and Dick gasped with relief. "That's enough to fly her about fifty miles," he said. "It would get us up out of the valley, anyhow."

"Always supposing the engine isn't too badly damaged," replied Monty, gravely.

"Come on. Let's see," said Dick, and they went on with their work of dismantling the whole engine.

Dick's lips tightened as he saw the dreadful lines scored in the exquisitely turned bearings. The horrible grit had worked in everywhere, and cut the hard steel like pointed diamonds.

At last everything was down, and the whole extent of the havoc exposed to view. At that moment, if the so-called Brown had been within reach, the chances are strong that the unpleasant inhabitants of the valley river would have enjoyed a feed. Jean's face, at least, was positively murderous. Jean felt this treachery all the more because he knew that the man who called himself Brown was really a countryman of his own.

Dick straightened his aching back with a sigh. He glanced at his watch. "I say, Monty, have you any idea of the time?" he asked.

"About dinner time, by the feel of it," answered Monty, with a faint grin.

"It's jolly near supper time," returned Dick. "It's past five o'clock."

Monty stared. "Five o'clock! No wonder I'm hungry. I'm as empty as a drum. Jean, light the stove."

The *Falcon* carried a big stock of tinned foods, and it was only a matter of a few minutes before a stew of meat and vegetables was ready. This, with biscuits and a pot of strong tea, made a capital meal, and one that put fresh strength into the three weary workers.

The air was so mild that they set up a rough table outside the *Falcon* and ate there.

"A nice job we're going to have to put all this together again," said Dick, rather disconsolately as he looked at the pile of scrap which at present represented the engine of the 'plane.

Monty did not answer, and Dick, glancing at his brother, saw that his eyes were fixed upon the great ledge which he had been looking at before.

"What's up?" he asked, sharply.

"There's a dickens of a lot of those funny-looking apes," replied Monty.

Dick whistled softly. "My word, you're right, and they're coming down, too. I say, I wonder if the brutes mean mischief."

CHAPTER XVII

NIGHTMARE LAND

JEAN BREGUET, too, was watching the apes. The creatures were evidently coming out of some hidden cave above the ledge, for their numbers were continually increasing.

Monty took his field-glasses from their case, and focused them. Presently he lowered them. "I don't like the look of it," he said. "There are hundreds of the brutes, and they're all watching us."

"Some of zem are coming down," announced Jean. "I sink ve 'ad bettaire get ze guns."

"I agree with you," said Dick, grimly, and taking the glasses from Monty, had a good look at the creatures. "Ugliest brutes I ever saw in my life, Monty," he added. "They're as big as the South African apes, and seem to be even more strongly built. If they come down on us in a mass, it's going to be awkward."

"I only wish we hadn't got the engine all to pieces like this," said Monty.

"That can't be helped," replied Dick. "In any case she won't fly again until we have cleaned the engine of that filthy emery stuff. Indeed, I'm a bit doubtful if we shall get much

out of her even when we do put her together again."

Monty looked at the big wall which stretched across the valley. "I'm nearly sure we've struck the wrong end of the place," he said. "I'll bet that wall was built to keep out something which comes from this lower end."

"It wouldn't keep the apes out," observed Dick.

"Then there's probably something worse than them, which we haven't seen yet," answered Monty, quickly.

Dick shrugged his shoulders. "Don't make it out worse than it is. The apes look bad enough. And," he added, "they are coming down."

They were. There was not a doubt about it. The beasts were beginning to clamber down from their ledge.

It was an uncanny sight, for they came in regular order as though under the direction of superior officers. The ledge on which they had mustered was at a great height above the valley floor, probably a thousand feet or more, and the creatures evidently had a regular way down. It made the boys feel dizzy to watch them methodically swinging downwards diagonally, each following exactly in the steps of the one before.

Soon there was a line a couple of hundred yards long, looking like a smear of grey paint all across the dark cliff face, and still more and more came

pouring out from the unseen cave like water from a leaky bucket.

"It's a blessed army!" growled Monty, as he filled the magazine of his rifle.

"And we've no protection—nothing to fight behind," added Dick. "If we could only go up to the wall, and meet them there, we might do some good."

"But we can't," replied Monty. "If the brutes got in amongst all this loose stuff from the engine they'd probably carry half of it off and then we should be properly done in."

Dick nodded. "That's so," he agreed. "All we can hope is that they're not acquainted with rifles, in which case they'll probably stampede at the first shots."

"Better not shoot until they actually attack," he added. "It's just possible that they are only inquisitive."

"Shoot ze first shots over zere 'eads," advised Jean, "but do not let zem come too close."

By this time the first of the horde had reached the ground, and the last had left the ledge. And now the boys, watching, saw a very curious thing which seemed to argue that these ape-like beasts had considerably more intelligence than most of their kind. For those that had just arrived on the floor of the valley did not move off, but waited where they were for the rest of their companions to join them. It was not until the very last had reached the bottom that the first started.

Then, in a thick, compact mass, the army, which must have been nearly a thousand strong, marched out across the level plain towards the strange visitant from the sky.

"Look at 'em!" gasped Monty. "The beggars are walking on their hind legs like men. I say, Dick, I don't like this one little bit."

Dick did not reply, but his face was very grim as he stood watching the advance of the ape army.

There was no doubt as to what they were after, for they came perfectly straight towards the aeroplane.

"Wait till they get to within a hundred yards," said Dick. "Then we'll all fire at once. But over their heads, mind you!"

Monty nodded to show he understood, then he and Dick and Jean stood silent.

The waiting was the worse part of it, for the apes had a long way to come and they did not travel very fast.

As they approached Monty watched them closely. The creatures, as he had seen already through the glasses, were about the size of the South African baboon, but were decidedly better built and more human in their appearance and carriage. Their bodies were covered with long, coarse, grey fur, but their faces were bare of hair. They had deep-set eyes and large jaws armed with powerful canine teeth. Then Monty saw that some carried what looked like clubs, but as they came nearer he realized that these were not sticks but

great bones, though of what animal he could not imagine.

In any case, it was a strange enough sight to see apes with weapons of any description. The mass of them marched in a crowd, without any formation, but about a dozen old ones, evidently chiefs, kept ahead of the rest. These now and then uttered a sharp barking cry, but the others made no sound.

Monty glanced at his brother. "I don't mind telling you I'm in a blue funk, old man," he remarked, with a wry smile.

"Same here," replied Dick, "But don't worry, old son. Like as not they'll skip for their lives when they hear the guns go off."

Silence again. A faint breeze blowing down the valley brought an unpleasant smell to their nostrils.

The apes were very near, and Dick raised his rifle. "Now!" he cried, and next instant three reports crashed out like one. Crashed, thundered, one might say, for the mighty cliffs caught up the sounds and sent them flying from one side of the valley to the other. The noise was prodigious, appalling, and apparently endless, for the echoes went pealing away up through the mist cloud to utter and immeasurable distances.

Dick and Monty looked at one another. "Did you ever hear such an awful shindy?" gasped Monty. "It's enough to scare the stuffing out of one."

"It's scared those blessed monkeys right enough," said Dick, and apparently he was right, for the grey army had not only stopped short, but a large number had fallen flat on the ground.

Monty stared at them. "But they haven't run away," he answered. "Hasn't we better give them another volley?"

Dick held up his hand. "Wait a bit," he said. "No use wasting cartridges. Let's see whether they won't clear now."

The crash of echoes died slowly to silence, a silence broken by sharp coughing barks, and the boys, watching in great suspense, saw that the leaders of the ape regiment were all on their feet, and apparently calling the rest to attack.

"Dick, it's no go," said Monty, in a low voice. "We shall have to shoot at them."

Dick was looking very grave indeed, and small wonder! For if the apes attacked in earnest, the game was up. Nothing could save the travellers. They would be simply swamped by numbers and torn to pieces.

"Zey come," said Jean, curtly. "Ve shoot to kill zis time, ees it not so, Monsieur Dick?"

Dick did not answer for a moment or two, but stood silently watching the grey brutes. But soon even he could not doubt that they meant mischief. His face hardened. "Yes—shoot!" he said. "And to kill, mind you!"

As he spoke he raised his rifle, and taking careful aim fired at one of the leaders. The bullet

struck the creature full in the head, killing it instantly. At the same moment Monty and Jean each picked an ape, and fired, and both fell.

"That's done it," cried Monty, as the apes ran back in confusion. Some dropped to the ground again, others fairly bolted. But not all. The larger number still stood their ground.

"Let 'em have it," snapped Dick. "Quick as you can shoot."

The crash of the firing became deafening, for the rifles were all provided with magazines holding clips of five cartridges. At such close range it was impossible to miss, and the nickel-tipped bullets tore through the close-packed ranks. In a moment a dozen or more of the great grey brutes lay dead or dying on the coarse grass, and the rest scattered in panic. When frightened like this, they no longer stood erect, but dropped on all fours and galloped rapidly but clumsily away. Within a matter of a minute or less they were all out of range.

"Ugh!" grunted Monty, "it's beastly, killing them. They look much too like men."

"It was necessary," replied Dick, sternly. "And it may be necessary to kill more."

"Why? Surely they've had enough," exclaimed Monty.

Dick pointed. "They're stopping," he said. "They are forming up again. These creatures look like apes, Monty, but I have a notion that

they have a deal more intelligence than apes in any other part of the world."

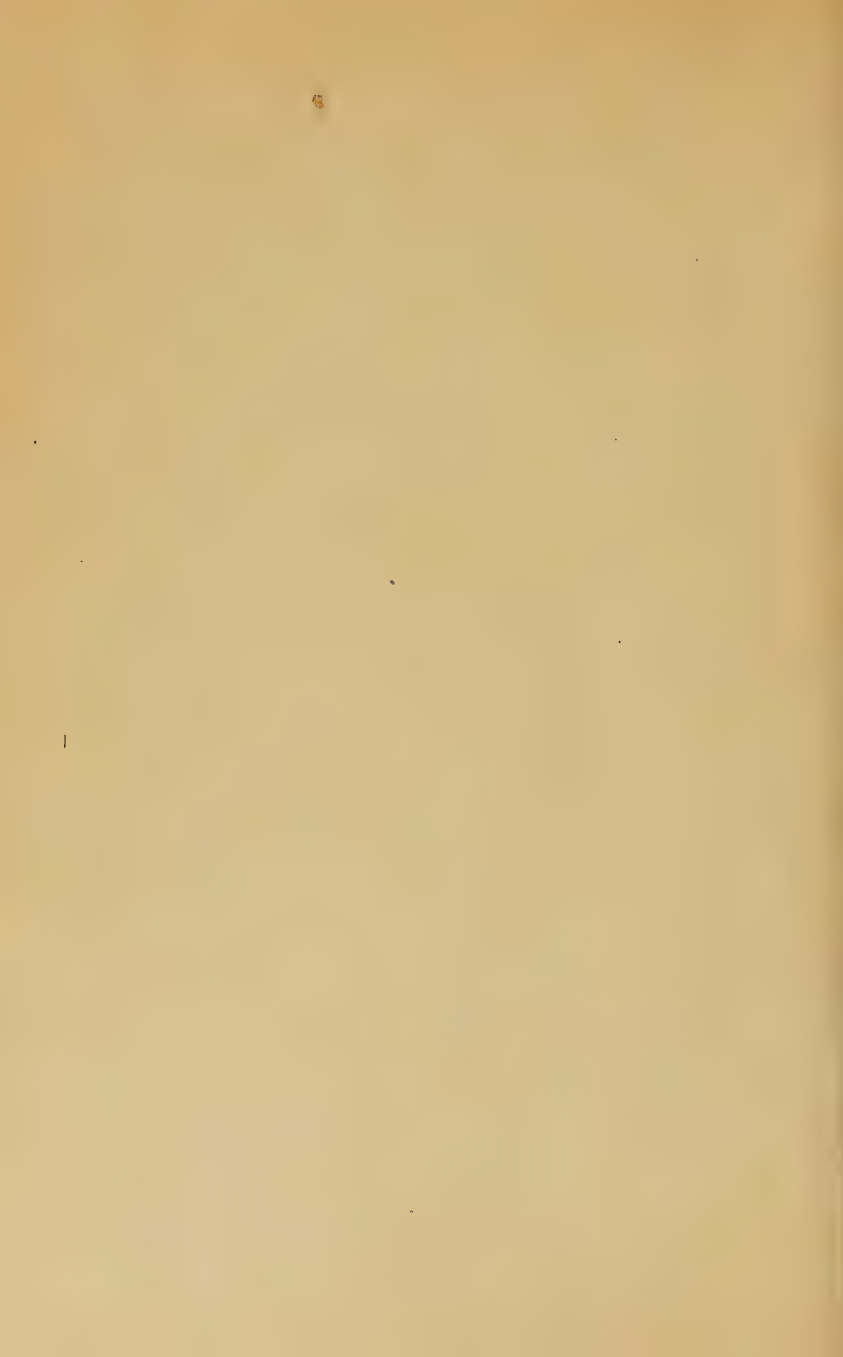
Jean nodded. "Zat ees true, Monsieur Dick. See. Zey are dividing in two bodies, I sink zey mean to come round both sides of us!"

Monty started. "My word, you're right, Jean. The real fight is still to come."



Jim raised his rifle, and taking careful aim fired at one of the leader. The bullet struck the creature full in the head, killing it instantly.

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CHAPTER XVIII

WORSE AND WORSE

It was an uncanny sight to see the new manoeuvre of the grey beasts. As Jean had said, they were dividing into two bodies, and one of these was working round so as to get upon the other side of the explorers. What was even more curious was that they were spreading out into open order. They seemed to realize quite well that the white men's bullets were more dangerous when fired into a packed mass.

Dick gave fresh orders. "Get out another box of cartridges, and fill your pockets. We must stand back to back and shoot as quickly as we can. If they rush us we must get into the cabin of the 'plane and shoot from the windows."

Jean quickly got the cartridges ready, and all reloaded and waited. Monty, watching the slow but steady advance of the apes, felt cold chills creeping down his spine. The whole business was hideously uncanny, and he quite realized that they were all in deadly peril.

Evening was drawing on, but there was little difference in the light. This was the beginning of the Antarctic summer, and for three months to come the sun would not set. True, the sun

was now nearing the horizon and the shadows of the great cliffs were cutting off some of its light, but there was still plenty to see by, and probably would be all night long.

At last the apes had formed almost a complete circle around the 'plane, and began to close in. Their leaders encouraged them with short, hoarse barks. The brutes seemed to be nervous, as if they knew the danger they ran, yet oddly and terribly resolute.

"Jean," said Dick, "you are the best shot of us three. Try and pick off that big chap." He pointed as he spoke to a huge shaggy brute that was now no more than two hundred yards away. Jean nodded, and dropping on his knee took careful aim and fired. The great monkey leapt into the air and fell dead.

But this time there was no panic among the rest. On the contrary there was a chorus of angry barks, and all began closing in more quickly.

"They mean business this time," exclaimed Dick between set teeth. "Let 'em have it, all of you. Our one chance is to keep them off!"

All three began firing again, blazing away as hard as they could take aim and pull trigger. But now it was no longer a matter of firing into the mass, for the apes were spaced out widely. It was not every shot that got home, and although many of the big beasts dropped, there were always others to take their places.

"It would take a machine gun to keep them

off," groaned Monty. "Look out, Dick. They're going to rush."

"We shall have to get into the cabin," answered Dick, shouting so as to be heard above the crackling echoes. "In with you!"

They dashed in. It was time, too, for the apes were closing in more and more rapidly. Though quite fifty of them strewed the ground they were so numerous that their losses did not seem to make much difference to their numbers.

Dick slammed the door behind them, and Monty and Jean, springing to the windows, set to firing again as fast as they could. Monty's rifle was already so hot he could hardly hold it.

When the apes saw their enemies vanish they paused. But only for a moment, then they came on again. Monty's heart sank. Although the cabin of the *Falcon* was strongly built of aluminium alloy, yet he did not believe it could withstand the attack of this horde of great, powerful brutes. And when it went—as it must do—the fate of himself and his companions did not bear thinking about. They would simply be torn to pieces—ripped like rags in those terrible hands and teeth.

The barkings grew sharper and louder, and suddenly a number of the apes dropped on all fours and came galloping up. The three in the cabin fired faster than ever, but there was no stopping the grey terrors.

The leaders were within fifty yards of the plane, and Dick was on the point of ordering

the windows to be closed, when all of a sudden the whole ape army turned and fled at full speed for the cliff from which they had come. Their flight was so sudden, so utterly unexpected, that at first Monty, watching, could not believe his eyes. Then from Jean, who was at the window opposite, the one which faced down the valley, he heard a queer, strangled gasp, and wheeling round saw that the Frenchman had dropped his rifle and was staring, wide-eyed, at something which he—Monty—could not see.

“What is it, Jean?” he demanded, sharply.

“I do not know!” gasped Jean.

Monty stepped across and thrust his head out of Jean’s window, only to pull it in even more quickly than he had pushed it out. “Dick,” he said, thickly, “for goodness sake look and tell me what this is.”

Dick looked, and like the other two was almost stunned at the sight.

“It—it’s a sea serpent come to land,” said Monty, a moment later.

Dick gave himself a shake. “No,” he said. “No. I—I think it’s a sort of centipede.”

“A centipede fifty feet long!” gasped Monty.

“Yes. Monty, this is an insect. I’m almost certain of it.”

He stopped and stared again at the horror. The creature, as Monty had said, was fifty or nearly fifty feet long. It was rich brown in colour, and it seemed to be made up of a score or more

of segments, each covered with glistening armour plate. These plates rattled as it advanced. It had an immense number of short curved legs which looked thin compared with its enormous bulk, but they carried it well, for it was coming along at a very brisk pace.

It stood about a yard high and its body was thicker than that of the largest snake. Its head alone was as large as a man's body, and from it stuck out what at first appeared to be long horns, but as it came nearer they saw that these were great antennæ or feelers which waved to and fro in a peculiarly terrifying fashion.

Worst of all were its eyes—great expressionless discs of a pale amber, looking as if made of dull glass.

"It can't be real," said Monty, slowly.

"It's real enough," replied Dick, grimly. "Monty, we're getting at the secret of that wall, I fancy. In this damp, warm place, insects might grow to any size, I fancy. And that's nothing but a giant centipede."

Monty shuddered. "No wonder the apes have cleared!" he said.

"Yes," replied Dick. "I don't blame them. Anyhow, the creature has saved our lives, for we could not have held off the apes for more than another two or three minutes."

"That's all very well," said Monty, with his eyes still fixed on the rapidly approaching horror. "But it strikes me it's out of the frying-pan into

the fire. That thing would finish us just as quickly as the apes. What are we to do—shoot it ? ”

“ No,” replied Dick, emphatically. “ Certainly not. The creature would take more killing than a score of apes. We must sit tight and wait, and see what it is going to do. Don’t dream of firing at it unless it attacks us.”

Monty merely nodded and the three stood silent, watching the monster. As it came nearer to the scene of battle its great feelers waved more wildly, and Monty thought to himself that it was working by scent, not sight. Very soon it arrived at the spot where the dead apes lay thickly. Here it stopped, and they saw it begin nosing the first carcasses. It rolled the body over two or three times, then began to eat it.

Fascinated with horror, they watched the creature at its terrible meal. The monster centipede ate first one ape’s body, and then another.

Suddenly the monster’s feelers began to whirl again, and it came straight towards the aeroplane.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BATTLE WITH THE BEAST

THE two boys looked at one another. "Shall we shoot?" asked Monty, doubtfully.

Dick shook his head. "Better wait till we see whether the brute really means mischief," he answered. Then, as he stared at the great proportions of the monster, "I doubt whether a bullet would do any good, Monty. You might almost as well shoot at a battleship."

"You are right, Monsieur Dick," said Jean. "Ze skin of ze beast, he ees like steel."

Rifles ready, the three stood watching the giant centipede. It travelled forward with a curious rippling motion, its dozens of legs seeming to work all at once. Each leg ended in a sort of claw, and these made a peculiar rustling sound as their owner moved across the grass. Its feelers, each about two yards long, kept whirling, and it seemed to the watchers that it had caught their scent. They did not think that it could actually see them.

The nearer it came, the worse it looked, and it was quite plain that the cabin of the aeroplane would be little or no protection against the vast size and weight of this horrible creature. In

spite of himself, Monty was shivering so that his teeth chattered. He felt exactly as if he were in the grip of a nightmare.

Presently Dick spoke again. "The beast has spotted us. There's no doubt about that. We'd better let fly and see if we can stop it. What do you say, Jean?"

Jean Breguet shrugged his shoulders, then nodded. "It ees as you say, Monsieur Dick."

"Then, all together, and aim at its head."

The three rifles spoke as one, and hard on the reports came a clang like that of bullets striking a metal target. The centipede stopped short, and a curious quiver ran through all its tremendous length; then its feelers whirled more rapidly than before, and it came on again faster than ever.

"It ees as I told you," growled Jean, as he fired again, but as before his bullet merely ricocheted off the plated hide of the dreadful creature.

"We're up against it this time, Monty," said Dick, hoarsely.

But Monty did not answer. He had dropped his rifle, and was rummaging frantically in a locker. "I've got 'em," he exclaimed a moment later, as he sprang to his feet.

"Got what?" demanded Dick.

"The bombs. I'd clean forgotten them," replied Monty, and as he spoke Dick saw that his brother was thrusting into his pocket a couple of small

bombs very like those used in the trenches in France.

Then before Dick or Jean could stop him, Monty had darted out of the cabin, and was running straight towards the centipede.

"Come back. You'll be killed!" shouted Dick, but Monty paid no attention. Dick and Jean jumped to the ground. Then all they could do was to stand and watch, helpless. They could not even shoot, for fear of hurting Monty.

"Ah, but he ees brave, zat boy!" murmured Jean, thickly.

"He'll be killed. He's thrown away his life, for nothing," groaned Dick, and indeed, it did seem as though he were right, for the monster, sensing Monty's approach, had changed its course and was making straight for him. And now it was so close that Dick and Jean could plainly see its enormous mouth, the width of its whole head, opening and shutting hungrily. Dick took his chance and fired once more, and this time with such good aim that the bullet passed straight in between those great, lid-like, bony jaws.

"Ah-h-h!" gasped Jean. "Zat one 'as 'urt heem."

It had. Not a double about it, for the creature stopped short, and reared its fore end upwards, raising its broad yellow head at least fifteen feet into the air.

Monty saw his chance. He pulled up short, plucked the pin from his bomb, and flung it.

The bomb, no bigger than an orange, hit the great, snake-like body.

"Oh, good shot!" yelled Dick, whom excitement had roused quite out of his usual gravity. The words were hardly out of his mouth before the bomb exploded with a stunning crack. A cloud of smoke, mingled with earth and stones, flew upwards, and in the middle of it was the centipede whirling round in the most amazing and terrible contortions.

"There are two of them!" cried Dick, sharply.

But Jean uttered a yell of mingled delight and relief. "No, eet ees only one, but he ees blowed in two!" he shrieked.

It was true. The effect of the explosion had been to break the vast yet brittle body of the giant insect into two parts, and though the head end was still running round and round, the tail was merely quivering feebly.

Dick and Jean, rifles in hand, rushed out, and venturing quite close up pumped lead into the frightful head through the eyes, into the mouth, until they had battered the last remnant of life out of their terrible enemy.

Then Dick turned to Monty and smote him on the back. "You did the trick that time, old chap!" he said, heartily. "If you hadn't thought of that bomb we should all have been done for."

Monty looked at his brother with a rather wan smile. "And if you hadn't slapped that

bullet into the beggar's mouth, he'd have had me before I could chuck my bomb at all," he answered.

"Hees dead, anyhow. Zatees de best thing," put in Jean. "Now I sink ve feex up ze 'plane, and go off as soon as ve can."

"Can't be too soon for me," agreed Monty. "Let's get at it."

Get at it they did, and tired as they were, worked like Trojans, and soon the engine began to look more like itself again. Dick shook his head sadly over his terribly scored piston heads and cylinders—the effect of the oil into which some one had put grit. But all thrée agreed that the damage was hardly as bad as they had feared, and that the *Falcon* would probably fly all right.

Busy as they were, they did not neglect to keep a sharp watch for fresh enemies, but happily nothing else turned up, and the only living things visible were the great grey apes in the cliffs. A few of the animals were to be seen on the lofty ledge, and there they sat silent and still as statues, grimly watching the strange visitors who had done such dreadful execution in their ranks. But seemingly they had had enough of fighting, for they made no fresh attempt at attack.

At last the work was done, the engine was together, the grit all cleared out, and fresh oil poured into the tank. By this time all three were achingly tired, and the one thing they longed for above everything else was a good sleep. But no

one even suggested anything of the sort. Their one idea was to get away from this horrible place. Each felt that they were certainly on the wrong side of the wall, which ran across the valley, and that farther along they would probably find some safe refuge.

When all was ready, Dick took his place in the pilot seat. He was terribly anxious, for though he had not said a word of it to the others, he was not by any means sure that the engine would work.

He pressed the starting-pedal. Nothing happened, and Dick's heart sank to his very boots. He tried again and again, with no result. "I'm afraid she won't go, Monty," he said to his brother in a low voice.

Monty came forward, looked around, then suddenly burst into a laugh.

"No wonder she won't go, Dick. You can't expect her to, without petrol." As he spoke he bent down and turned a small tap. "Now try again," he said, and almost at once the big engine burst into roaring life, and next minute was bumping swiftly across the uneven turf.

Dick drew a deep sigh of relief, and lifting her, sent her skimming over the great stone wall. As the big machine rose, clattering, towards the cloud roof the echoes flung back from the cliffs were almost deafening, and the grey apes, fairly scared at last, vanished from the ledges and dashed into the mouths of their caves.

It was now about midnight by the clock, but there was not much difference in the soft silvery light which filled this strange valley. Monty standing at one window had no need to strain his eyes to see that in the valley below were large enclosures bounded by great solid walls, and here and there one of those large, strange, sluggish-looking animals which they had previously noticed. These had a sort of kangaroo-like appearance and seemed to be grazing on the grass. Monty felt almost sure that they were tame.

And if tame, he said to himself, why, then there must be people who had tamed them. The same people who had built these big walls. The question was, who were these people, and where were they to be found?

"They live in caves," said Monty, half aloud. "I'm sure of it. Life in the open in this blessed valley can't be healthy for anybody unless they wear armour plate and carry machine-guns."

His musings were interrupted by a cry from Jean. "Ze light! Look! Ze great fire!"

CHAPTER XX

THE GREAT GLARE

THE Frenchman pointed as he spoke, and both Monty and Dick saw a dull glare in the distance. The *Falcon*, though not at her best, was yet lapping up the miles at the rate of more than one a minute, and every instant the light became clearer.

“Why, it looks like a blast furnace!” exclaimed Monty, sharply. He went over to Dick and spoke in his ear. “It is a blast furnace, Dick.”

“It does look like it,” agreed his brother, “but I think more likely it’s a volcano of some sort.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” replied Monty, “but I shouldn’t wonder if you’re right. The whole valley is volcanic.”

“We shall see pretty soon,” said Dick. “I’m heading straight for it.”

Soon they were able to see that the light was really a great spout of fire soaring to a huge height into the air. It rose from the ground on the right of the valley, about half-way between the river and the cliff. As the *Falcon* approached, the tremendous size of the flame became clear. It soared up to the height of the spire of a tall cathedral. Near the ground no flame was visible.

It first showed at a height of about fifty feet and above this as a blue column. Higher, it turned yellow and broadened out, and at the waving summit the colour was golden. It was in fact an immense fountain of fire, and its light so intense that the whole valley glowed for miles.

Monty spoke in Dick's ear. "Don't go too close, old chap. The heat will be something frightful."

Dick merely nodded, but a little later he cut out the engine, and started to plane down. The moment the roar of the engine ceased, the crew of the *Falcon* became aware of a new sound, a shrill and tremendous whistling.

"What's that?" cried Monty.

"The fire," his brother answered, quietly. "I've got it now, Monty. It's a gas fountain."

Monty's eyes widened, but for the moment he did not speak again. Dick was just going to land, and would need all his care and attention for this job.

A few moments later the landing wheels touched ground, and the 'plane, skimming along a surface of fairly level turf, came to rest. She had barely stopped before Monty had flung open the door and was scrambling down.

"Steady, Monty!" cried Dick. "You don't know what you may be running into."

"We shall be all right here," answered Monty, confidently. "Even the apes wouldn't face a fire like that. I say, isn't it gorgeous?"

“Gorgeous is the only word for it,” agreed Dick, as he followed his brother to the ground. Jean too climbed down, and the three stood, side by side, staring at the most wonderful sight that any of them had ever seen in all their lives. The great gas jet—for that was what it was—rose from a small basin and gushed upwards with such a force that the sound of it was like that of a monstrous steam whistle.

High in the air the wide plume of flame danced and swayed monstrosly, now rising to five or six hundred feet, then dropping to perhaps half that height, only to shoot up again more fiercely than before. The heat of it was terrific, and even where the three stood, fully half a mile away, it almost scorched their faces.

All around the basin itself the ground was burnt and bare, and a few blackened rocks showed their ragged heads above the dark soil. The glare of the great light shone redly upon the tremendous cliff over to the right, showing it rising endlessly into the mist, and so powerful was the illumination that even the opposite cliff, quite five miles away, flung back reflections of the great dancing flames.

As for the echoes, they were beyond description, for as the flame rose and sank so did the sound of its whistling, and these sounds caught and magnified were picked up by the vast rock walls, and flung to endless distances.

For perhaps five minutes the three watched

the amazing flare. Then at last Dick managed to withdraw his eyes from it, and look about at the surrounding ground and the cliffs. "No sign of monkeys here, Monty," he said. "Or anything else, so far as I can see."

"I told you so," said Monty. "And since we are safe, Dick," he added, yawning, "suppose we get a wink of sleep. Goodness knows, we need it."

Dick agreed; but Jean said that he thought they ought to keep a watch. The good fellow volunteered to take the first watch, and Dick and Monty were both so utterly worn out that they did not feel like arguing. All Monty said was, "Call me in two hours then, Jean," then he and Dick clambered back into the cabin, lay down, and in spite of the amazing din of the gas fountain were both asleep inside a minute.

To Monty it seemed as though he had hardly closed his eyes before some one was shaking him by the shoulder, and looking up he saw Jean's face. "You 'av 'ad three hours, Monsieur Monty," said Jean, with a smile, a smile so pale and wan that Monty's heart smote him, and he jumped up in a hurry. "Zere ees coffee ready," continued Jean. "It veel 'elp you keep awake."

"Oh, I shall be all right," said Monty, quickly, and staggered to the door. Jean dropped all in a heap, and was asleep before Monty was outside. Monty glanced at Dick, who lay on his side sleeping

peacefully, then he himself clambered down to the ground.

He was still so drowsy that he could hardly see, but there was the coffee pot on the spirit stove and a big mug of the hot, strong stuff roused him a bit. The heat from the gas geyser was almost more than comfortable, but Monty was so fascinated by its amazing dance of flame that he simply could not take his eyes off it.

He sat on the warm ground with his back against one of the wheels of the 'plane, and stared at the vast roaring jet. Its size and fury fascinated him, and he fell to wondering for how many thousands of years it had been dancing and roaring there, unseen perhaps by any eyes but those of the grey apes, and other weird inhabitants of this amazing valley. Then he began to think again about the walls and the grazing animals, and he looked round.

Yes, there were the walls, though at some distance away. And there was the river with its curiously green water winding in wide curves down the middle of the valley. He began to feel very sleepy again. The three hours' rest which he had had wasn't much after nearly twenty-four hours of flying, fighting, and hard work.

He helped himself to another cup of coffee, and looked at his watch. It was seven in the morning—just about a day and a night since they had started. Monty could hardly believe it. It seemed at least a week.

Once more he looked round, and all of a sudden he stiffened and sat quite still staring at something near the base of the cliff. Something which moved.

It was too far off to make out what it was, but certainly it was a living creature of some sort.

Next minute Monty was on his feet, and climbing quickly back into the cabin, he picked up a pair of field-glasses and his rifle, and went swiftly back down the ladder. Putting the glasses to his eyes, he focused them on the moving object and for a few seconds stood perfectly still. Then a sigh of amazement escaped his lips. "It's a man!" he exclaimed. "A man, or at any rate a human being of some sort."

He crept back into the cabin and with some difficulty roused Dick. "I've seen a man, Dick," he told him.

"A man!" gasped Dick. "Not Anton Javelot!"

"No—not a bit like him. This was a little chap—not more than five feet high. And—and, Dick, you'll think I'm dreaming, but I believe he had feathers."

Dick's eyes widened. "Feathers!" he repeated. "You mean, growing on him?"

"That's what it looked like, but, of course, I couldn't be certain through the glasses."

"Most likely he was wearing some sort of feather dress," replied Dick. "But where was he? What was he doing?"

“He was close under the cliff, and he seemed to be looking at us. Come on out. He may be there still.”

Leaving Jean sleeping, Dick followed Monty out.

CHAPTER XXI

TIME TO THINK

DICK put the glasses to his eyes again. "He is white," he said, in a startled tone, "white as you and I. But he does seem to be covered with feathers."

"Yes, I saw that, Dick," replied Monty, "but I think the feathers are a sort of dress. I'm sure he is a real person."

"Real people, all right," said Dick. "But fancy—fancy finding such a race here in the Antarctic!"

"Well, I don't see why not," argued Monty. "There is warmth, water, grass, animal life."

"But where could they have come from, Monty?"

"Been here all the time, I expect," answered Monty, in his practical way. "You know the Antarctic once had quite a warm climate. We can tell that by the coal. When it turned cold the survivors must have taken refuge in this valley, and they've been here ever since."

"But it's thousands of years since the change came about," exclaimed Dick.

"That doesn't make any difference. The Eskimo of the Arctic have kept going for scores of

centuries under much harder conditions than there are here."

Dick sighed. "You may be right, Monty. You must, I suppose. But think of the excitement in Europe when we bring news of such a discovery!"

"Time enough for that when we get there," replied matter-of-fact Monty. "Just now it seems to me that our job is to find out whether these folk are going to be friendly or whether they will start fighting us like those apes." He took the glasses from his brother. "I say, there are more of them coming out."

"Where are they coming from?" asked Dick.

"Out of a cave, I believe, but the mouth of it seems to be hidden behind a sort of fold of the cliff, so that I can't see it. Yes, they are simply crowding out. There must be fifty of them."

"What is it they are carrying?" inquired Dick. "It looks to me as if they had weapons of some kind."

"Yes," Monty answered, with the glasses at his eyes, "bows, I think. But they are made of some shiny silvery stuff which doesn't look like wood."

"Probably metal," said Dick. "So far as I can make out, there are no trees of any size in the valley. But metal bows might do plenty of damage, and I rather think that the best thing we can do, Monty, is to clear out."

Monty looked quite indignant. "Clear out! Man alive, haven't we got rifles—and bombs?"

"Yes," agreed Dick, quietly, "but the last thing we want to do is to use them. These queer folk may be friendly or they may not. We can't tell yet. It seems to me that our best course is to show them that we don't mean them any mischief, but that at the same time, if they are hostile, we have the means of clearing out or fighting them just as we like."

Monty nodded. "I see," he said, slowly. "Yes, perhaps you are right, Dick. But wait awhile, and let's see first whether they are going to attack or not."

Even without glasses, the boys could see that the crowd of little pale figures was increasing in numbers; with the glasses, Monty saw the mysterious folk forming up into a sort of troop. All were dressed alike in close-fitting garments, which seemed to be made entirely of soft silvery feathers, and all carried short but stiff-looking bows, with quivers of arrows slung across their backs. The bows were undoubtedly made of metal, and so, too, apparently, were the arrows. The men wore head-dresses of metal.

After a while Monty turned to his brother. "They're starting, Dick. They are coming our way."

Dick nodded. "All right. Then I'm going to shift, Monty."

"You won't try firing over their heads first?"

"I think not, for we really have not cartridges to waste, and I don't think a noise and a flash are going to scare them. Anyhow, the *Falcon* is going to make a jolly sight more row than half a dozen rifles."

Monty grinned. "Right you are. We'll see what they think of the exhaust. You're not going to fly, are you, Dick?"

"No—just taxi away a bit. We can lift if we have to, but you can be quite sure I'm not going to waste a drop more petrol than I can help."

The two got back into the cabin and closed the door, and Dick dropped into the pilot's seat. "Let her rip!" said Monty.

Dick pressed the starting-lever, and at once the big engine broke into its familiar clattering roar, the propeller spun, and the *Falcon* went skimming lightly away across the smooth grass.

The noise and movement roused Jean, who had been sleeping, but he was so dead tired that, when Monty explained what was happening, he did not even try to get up; he merely dropped back and closed his eyes again. Monty watched the little people and saw that as the 'plane started they all stopped short, but he could not see what they were doing or whether they were really frightened. The distance became too great for that.

Suddenly the *Falcon* began to bump frightfully, and Dick quickly switched off the engine. "I

say, what have we struck ? ” he cried to Monty.

Monty, who had been knocked clean off his feet by the bumping, picked himself up. “ A ploughed field, I should fancy,” he said, ruefully, as he rubbed a bruised elbow. Then he looked out. “ Why, they are huge ant-hills, Dick ! Phew ! I hope we haven’t damaged the wheels.”

“ I’m sure I hope not,” said Dick, anxiously. “ Get out and see. We’re a good mile from the cave mouth. You’ll be safe enough.”

Monty climbed out, and after a minute or two came back. “ The landing gear’s all right, thank goodness,” he told Dick, “ but we’ve run on to a very nasty bit of ground. It’s all mounds of fresh-turned earth. I don’t think they are ant-hills. It looks to me as if we’ve run into a warren of giant rabbits or something of the sort.”

“ Giant rabbits ! ” repeated Dick. “ Did you see any ? ”

“ No, but there are some thundering big holes in the ground.”

Dick looked uneasy. “ This place is the limit,” he growled. “ You can’t move without running into some fresh trouble or danger. I say, we’d better try and wheel her out, Monty. If these little people come after us we must be ready to get off the ground, if necessary.”

“ Right you are,” agreed Monty. “ Jean, I’m afraid you’ll have to help us. She’s a lump of a thing to shift without engine power.”

When they reached the ground they found,

as Monty had said, that it was extraordinarily broken. For an area of half an acre or so the turf was covered in every direction with mounds of loose earth two to three feet high. The fungi which grew here, as in the lower end of the valley, had been uprooted and the grass was covered with freshly-thrown-up earth. "Some burrowing animal. Not a doubt about it," said Dick.

Jean frowned. "Eef zey are rabbits," he said, "zey must be as big as sheep. I 'ope zey vill not eat us."

The idea of rabbits eating them made Monty chuckle, but when they got to work to shift the 'plane there wasn't much laughing for any of them. It was cruelly hard work, and they were soon dripping with perspiration. Luckily the *Falcon* had been stopped before she got into the worst of it, and by dint of hard pushing they gradually got her back to smoother ground. They were just at the edge of the broken ground when Monty gave a yell and jumped aside. "A snake!" he cried, and snatched a pistol from his pocket. Dick and Jean let go of the framework and sprang to the rescue.

Suddenly Monty slipped his pistol back and gave a sharp almost hysterical laugh. "It's not a snake; it's a worm," he exclaimed.

"A worm," repeated Dick. "So it is. But my word, what a whopper!"

The three stood gazing at the worm. But such a worm! It was four feet long and as thick as

a man's wrist, and as it wriggled across the grass it lengthened itself out to quite two yards. It was the most unpleasant object that could be imagined, yet quite plainly harmless.

"I don't like zis place," growled Jean.
"All ze sings are ze wrong size."

"I wish we could take it back with us," said Dick, still staring at the monstrosity.

"We shall need a fleet of R33's if we want to take back samples of all the natural history of this valley," smiled Monty. "But, Dick, we are forgetting the feathered men."

Dick looked round. Although they were now quite a distance from the gas fountain, its glare lighted the whole land, making everything bright as broad sunlight. "They've gone," he said. "There's not a sign of them."

"The question is how long they'll stay gone," said Monty, as he mopped his streaming forehead with a rather grubby handkerchief. "If I was only sure they'd give us even three hours for sleep, I'd bless 'em for ever."

Dick looked at his brother and saw how white and worn his face looked. "Turn in, old chap," he said. "You and Jean take another nap while I watch. Yes, I mean it. You'll be all the fitter for the next job."

Monty protested, but Dick insisted, and when Dick really did put his foot down there was an end of it. The result was that five minutes later Monty and Jean were sound asleep, while Dick,

his chin in his hands, sat at the open door of the cabin of the big 'plane staring out at the roaring splendour of the great gas fountain and deep in his mind wondering what was going to happen, how they were going to find Anton Javelot, and what was going to be the outcome of the whole strange business.

CHAPTER XXII

THE REAL RABBIT

It was very still down here in the valley. Not a breath of wind stirred, and the air had a curiously drowsy quality. More than once Dick found himself nodding, and at last became so sleepy that to rouse himself he got up, put the kettle on the spirit stove, and heated up some coffee. He poured out a steaming mugful, mixed in some condensed milk, and was sipping it slowly when suddenly he became aware of a movement in the distance close to the spot where they had first seen the little feathered men.

Laying down his mug, he picked up his glasses and focused them. What he saw was two—two only of the little men—coming slowly towards the 'plane. They did not seem to be carrying their bows. In fact, so far as Dick could see, they had no weapons of any sort, but each carried something that looked rather like one of those feather brooms that housemaids use to dust pictures, only made of pure white feathers.

Dick stared hard at them. "Peace envoys, I fancy," he said to himself, "and those feather dusters are white flags or something of that sort. Well, I'm not scared of a couple of little rabbits

like that, and I'm certainly not going to shift again."

So Dick sat where he was and finished his coffee, and waited while the two little men came steadily towards him. As they came nearer he could see that though small—not more than about four feet high—they were beautifully made. They carried themselves well, too. Their skins were as fair as those of Norwegians, but he could not tell what colour their hair was, for their heads were covered by their close-fitting caps, which were made of lustrous white metal. Their clothes were a tunic made of feathers and rather close-fitting, and their legs appeared to be covered with a kind of casing made apparently of the same metal as their caps. There was no hair on their faces.

"They certainly don't look very formidable," said Dick to himself, then he moved slightly and touched his brother. "Monty, wake up," he said. "Here's an embassy coming from the Feather Folk."

Monty sat up, yawned, then the sense of Dick's words reached his sleepy brain, and he was up like a shot. "Some of them coming! Have you got your rifle?"

"I don't think we'll need rifles. I hope not, anyhow," said Dick, quietly. "They are not armed."

"No, you're right. It's a peace deputation," agreed Monty, quickly. "But what's the matter

with them? Why are they pulling up? They don't seem to like our rabbit burrows."

Monty was right. The two small men had stopped a few yards away, on the edge of the rough ground, and quite clearly were not anxious to come nearer. And by the way they looked at the hillocks, it seemed plain that it was these they were afraid of rather than the big flying machine or its inhabitants.

Monty stood up and, taking off his cap, made a bow to the visitors. "Come on," he said, in an encouraging tone. They looked at him, then one spoke to the other in a rather high-pitched yet pleasant-sounding voice, a voice which to both the boys sounded oddly like the twittering of birds. Then they came forward.

As they did so, Monty saw the ground suddenly heave behind them. The turf broke, the raw black earth rose as if impelled by some tremendous force from below, and suddenly from the centre of the heap rose a long-pointed snout covered with thick dark fur. For a moment Monty stood stock still, hardly able to believe his eyes, then with a loud shout, "Look out!" he snatched up his rifle and made a flying leap from the door right down to the ground.

The little men must have had very quick ears, for they had heard the beast almost as soon as Monty had seen it, and both had leapt aside. One, however, evidently the elder of the two, unfortunately tripped on the broken ground, and fell.

Before he could scramble up the owner of the snout had emerged from underground, revealing itself as a mole-like creature, but as big as a half-grown pig. With wonderful quickness, considering its short legs and heavy bulk, it snatched at the fallen man, and seized him by one leg in its tremendous jaws.

Monty dared not shoot for fear of hitting the little man. In a flash he reversed his rifle and, dashing up, brought the butt down with all his force on the horrible creature's head. It was a blow fit to kill any ordinary creature, but this beast appeared to be made of india-rubber. Instead of dying, it merely released its hold on the little man and turned like a flash on Monty.

"Look out, Monty!" yelled Dick, who by this time was also on the ground.

But Monty, though considerably surprised, was not caught napping and, dodging, got clear just in time. There was a flash, a crack and Dick's rifle spoke, the bullet ripping right through the head of the beast. This did the trick. The thing rolled over and lay writhing and struggling, with its four short legs, armed with gigantic claws, kicking in the air.

"Good for you, Dick!" said Monty. "But I say—what a brute! It's a mole, isn't it?"

"Yes, I should say so. We might have known it if we'd had any sense," replied Dick, "especially after that worm we saw. I say, I hope there are no more of 'em. If one of those got hold



In a flash Monty reversed his rifle and brought the butt down with all his force on the horrible creature's head.

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of you, he'd gobble you up like an alligator."

"But what about this chap?" asked Monty, as he knelt down beside the little man.

"His metal stocking has saved his leg," said Dick, "but he's pretty badly bitten, all the same. We'd better lift him into the 'plane."

He picked the little man up. It was not difficult, for he did not weigh more than about six stone. The little man took it quite quietly, and evidently understood Dick's good intentions. Meantime, his companion, who had been standing just clear of the broken ground, came up and spoke quickly to Monty, and though his language, of course, meant nothing to the English boy, yet Monty understood clearly enough that the other was telling him that this was a very dangerous place.

Monty had no doubt about it, and signed to the other to follow Dick and himself into the 'plane. With a coolness which struck Monty as remarkable, the little chap obeyed, and in another minute they were all in safety inside the cabin.

The first thing was to attend to the wounded man's injuries, and Dick started to try to remove the metal covering from the damaged leg. He could not find the fastenings, but the younger man understood and, pushing Dick gently aside, touched some small studs, and the greaves came off at once. Monty noticed and admired the exquisitely light and strong workmanship of the armoured stocking.

The leg was badly cut by the mole's terrific teeth, and was bleeding a good deal. Dick got water and mixed a little carbolic with it, then sponged the wounds and bandaged them with boracic lint. The wounded man was most evidently grateful. He had never made a sound during the dressing, and both the boys admired his pluck. "Better offer them some grub, Dick," suggested Monty. "I'll put the kettle on."

"Good idea, Monty. I'll open a tin of biscuits, and some chocolate may appeal to them."

Meantime both the little men were looking all round with the greatest interest and curiosity. Yet there was nothing in the least ill-bred in their behaviour. In fact, their manners were just as good as those of any educated white folk, and the boys could see also that they were daintily clean, and their hands well kept. They had very large, blue eyes, and their skins were paler than any that the boys had ever seen.

"I expect it's because they live in caves," said Monty aside to Dick, and Dick nodded.

The little men rather shied at the hot coffee, but they ate some biscuits and, as for the chocolate, it was quite clear that they approved of this absolutely.

"I only wish to goodness we could talk to them," said Monty. "But this language of theirs is more like birds twittering than anything else I can think of."

"We shall get the hang of it in time," replied

Dick. "Anyhow, we've made friends, and that's the great thing. I've a mind to get the machine back close to the cave-mouth. I feel we should be safer there."

He turned and pointed through the open door of the cabin towards the cave mouth; and both the little men nodded energetically. Dick nodded, too, and turned back towards the pilot seat. Before he could settle himself in it, the whole 'plane gave a sudden heave, then dropped sideways as one wheel settled deeply into the ground.

Monty snatched up his rifle. "Those abominable moles again!" he cried. Then, as he looked out, he gave a cry of dismay. "My goodness, the place is alive with them!" he exclaimed. "Look out, Dick, or we shall have the whole show upside down!"

CHAPTER XXIII

ANTON AT LAST

DICK sprang to the door and, looking out, saw at once that Monty was right. In every direction the ground was opening and long, sharp, pinkish snouts pushing up. More than one of the giant moles was already above the surface, and two were tackling the still warm body of the one that had been shot.

"The brutes! They've come up after the dead one!" exclaimed Monty. "I didn't know moles were cannibals."

"Oh, aren't they?" answered Dick. "Why even our own garden moles at home will eat one another. And, mind you, as Professor Thomson said, the mole for its size is the strongest and fiercest animal in the world, and if it was as big as a lion would clear the world."

"Well, these aren't as big as lions," growled Monty, who was thrusting cartridges into his magazine. "But they're quite big enough, thank you, and I propose to wipe the lot out just as quick as ever I can, for if I don't, I believe they'll eat the blessed aeroplane."

Dick shrugged his shoulders. "We shall have

to get rid of them, for if we don't we shall never get the *Falcon* out of this."

As he spoke he aimed and fired. The nickel-pointed bullet ploughed through the back of the nearest mole, breaking its spine. It fell over with a queer grunting sound and instantly was seized by one of its fellows, who bit and tore at it savagely.

Monty picked off another. There was no wasting of cartridges, for both brothers were fair shots, and at such a range it was not easy to miss. All the same, both Dick and Monty were shooting with the utmost care. Though neither had said so, each was secretly doing his best to impress the Feather Men.

And the younger of these, who stood close behind the boys, certainly was impressed. Monty could see that by his face, and his wonder grew as, one after another, the giant moles rolled over, each in turn shot clean through the head or heart by the long, sharp-pointed bullets of the small-bored rifles.

Nine fell in succession, and then there seemed to be no more.

But the *Falcon's* wheels were fast, and her crew had to get down and literally put their shoulders to the wheel before they could get her out. The younger Feather Man helped valiantly, and Monty found himself quite liking the eager little chap.

Once the wheels were free, Dick signed to their

new friend to get in again. "It's all right now, I think, Monty," he said. "I'm going right back to the cave-mouth. What do you say?"

"I say yes, every time," agreed Monty. "If they're all like these chaps, we shall have nothing to complain of. What do you think, Jean?"

"I sink so, too," agreed Jean. "And zere vill be no more of zese nasty beasts so close to ze geyser of fire."

Dick nodded. "That's quite a consideration, too," he replied. "The 'plane and we, too, will be a lot safer there than here."

So Dick dropped into his pilot seat, and next moment the engine began to roar. Monty, watching the Feather Men, could tell that they were both pretty badly scared, but that they were much too proud to show it. They sat rigid in their seats while the 'plane skimmed swiftly back towards the gas fountain, from which the great geyser of flame rose roaring to an enormous height.

Dick ran her in between the great blaze and the valley wall and pulled up opposite the mouth of a cave which was now plainly visible in the foot of the cliff. The very first thing that he and Monty noticed was that the mouth was closed with a heavy gate of the same lustrous metal which the envoys wore as greaves and caps.

"Looks like a state of siege," said Monty aside to his brother.

Dick nodded. "I think I shall feel a bit safer on the far side of that gate," he replied. "This

valley is much too full of unpleasant surprises for my taste."

The younger of the Feather Men was already at the door of the cabin, and beckoning them to follow. But Dick hesitated. "I'm wondering whether it's safe to leave the 'plane alone," he said.

The good Jean spoke up. "I sink it safe enough here," he told Dick, "but I vill stay with ze machine. Zen if you hear me shoot you vill come quick."

"Right!" said Dick, much relieved.

"And take your pistols," added Jean. "I do not sink you vill need zem, but you nevaire know."

"They're safe in our pockets," Monty informed him. "Well, good-bye, Jean. We'll come back for you after a bit."

The little man was waiting for them at the door, but Dick called his attention to his wounded companion. The other then indicated by signs that bearers would be sent for him from the cave, so Dick and Monty hesitated no longer, but followed their leader out of the 'plane and across to the cave-mouth.

Their approach had been seen, and before they reached the gate it was flung open. They noticed that it moved soundlessly on heavy hinges and that it was most beautifully made. Also that it was opened by some sort of machinery, for there was no one visible in the cave-mouth. Their

guide waited for them courteously, and as soon as they were inside the gate closed automatically.

The boys found themselves in a passage about ten feet wide and seven or eight high, cut in the solid rock. The floor was smooth as a marble pavement, and the passage went straight in for some distance. It was lighted by lamps set in the roof, but what the light was the boys could not make out. Whatever they were, they gave an excellent light.

Suddenly their guide stopped, and they saw in front of them two more of the feathered people. These were much older men. The boys could see that from their lined faces, but since their heads were covered with a sort of head-dress they could not tell whether their hair was grey or not. Their guide and these men spoke together in their curious twittering voices. "I believe our pal's telling 'em how we wiped out the moles," whispered Monty to Dick.

"Perhaps he is," replied Dick. "Anyhow, they seem inclined to be civil."

He was right. The two elder men were now bowing to the boys, at the same time stretching out their hands, with the palms outwards. Dick and Monty also bowed as politely as they knew how.

"And what do we do now?" asked Monty of Dick, in a low voice.

"Our job is to find Anton. Remember that, Monty," replied Dick. "If he is alive at all he

must be with these people or some other colony of them. It's quite certain he could never have survived out in the valley there, alone. Do you think we could explain to these old gentlemen what we are after?"

"If you've got a pencil handy, I'll try," replied Monty.

Dick started. "Wait a minute. I can do better than that," he said, and slipping his hand into his inside pocket, brought out a bundle of papers. From these he selected a photograph.

"Anton himself!" said Monty, and, nodding, Dick handed the picture to one of their hosts. He took it in his long slim fingers and gazed at it a moment. Then both the boys saw a flash of understanding cross his face.

"By Jove, they've seen him!" exclaimed Monty. "What luck! He may be here."

The man who held the photograph showed it to the other, and he, too, nodded understandingly. Then both turned up the passage, and beckoned the boys to follow.

"They've got him here. That's clear," said Monty, in much excitement. "But I wonder why he didn't come to meet us."

"We shall find out soon, I expect," Dick answered. "Hulloa, look at this!"

As he spoke they came to a wide opening in the passage wall. It was a broad doorway across which hung a curtain of some thick, dark stuff. But the curtain did not quite cover the opening,

and the boys caught a glimpse of a great hall full of light and of many of the Feather People, all of whom seemed to be busy at various sorts of work. It was only a glimpse, but it filled the boys with intense interest. Their guides, however, went straight on, and they had, of course, to follow.

They came to a flight of stairs carved in the solid rock and, as they climbed, noticed that these curved back towards the face of the cliff.

"Regular cliff dwellings," said Dick. "I expect all their rooms are cut so as to open on the face of the cliff."

"Took a bit of work to carve all this," answered Monty.

A second flight of steps succeeded the first, then a third. At the top of these they were again in a rock corridor with rooms opening off on either side. All these corridors were equally well lighted and the air was sweet and fresh.

At last their guides stopped opposite a curtained doorway, and one, pulling the curtain aside, beckoned them to enter.

The room was a small one, the floor covered with a kind of grass mat, and the bare rock of the wall hidden by some similar fabric. The roof was richly carved.

But these details the boys hardly noticed until later, for their eyes were at once fixed upon a low couch close to the opposite wall on which, partly

covered with a light feather rug, lay a dark-eyed, black-haired young man.

“Anton Javelot !” exclaimed Dick and Monty in one breath.

CHAPTER XXIV

ANTON'S STORY

THE man on the bed started up into a sitting position and stared at the two Vincés. There was sheer amazement in his eyes. "Qui êtes-vous—Anglais?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, we are English," responded Dick, quickly, but speaking in his best French. "You are Javelot, are you not?"

"But yes. And I speak English. But how came you here? This is so marvellous it takes the breath from me."

"There's nothing very marvellous," replied Dick, with his grave smile. "Our name is Vince, and your father engaged us to come and look for you."

"My dear father! Then he is alive—and well?"

"Except for his lameness, he is very well indeed, and he is waiting off the Ice Barrier in a ship until we can bring you to him."

Anton put out both hands and Dick took them in his.

"Ah, but it is fine to hold the hand of an Englishman," said Anton, with emotion. "But, my friend, you have not told me how you have

reached this end of the earth—how you found your way into the depths of this profound abyss.”

“Quite simple,” said Dick. “We got your message and came by aeroplane. If you ask me, it’s a great deal more wonderful how you ever succeeded in climbing down here.”

Anton shivered slightly. “It was indeed a miracle. I came by the secret way. But that, they tell me, is now closed.”

“Then you can speak their language?” put in Monty, quickly.

“A little, my friend. It is difficult, but I have had many months in which to learn it, and they have been kind—these strange little, sadly afflicted folk.”

“Afflicted—what do you mean?” demanded Monty.

Anton pointed to two metal stools. “Seat yourselves, my friends. There is much to tell. Will you have food before you talk?”

“We’re not particularly hungry, thank you,” said Dick. “And we are both crazy to hear your story.”

“And since our hosts have departed and left us alone, they evidently expect us to have a good yarn,” put in Monty.

“Yes, they are most kind,” said Anton, “more so than most of the peoples in Europe. For me—helpless as I have been for so long—they have done much.”

“Were you hurt in getting down here?” asked Dick, sympathetically.

“No, Monsieur Vince. It was in a fight with the ape-folk that my left leg was broken. The bone has knitted, but I fear there is other damage, for I cannot walk without crutches.”

“We’ll get you fixed up all right once we get you back to France,” said Monty, cheerily. “Now do tell us all about it.”

Anton smiled, and it was a pleasant smile, which reminded the two Vincés of his father. Then he began. “You know how I went ahead of my companions, and how the storm caught me?”

Dick nodded. “We, too, were caught by a storm,” he said. “It nearly finished us, so we can understand.”

“It blew me over the edge of that frightful cliff,” said Anton. “I cannot describe to you my feelings when I found myself falling into that bottomless abyss with the grey cloud floating beneath. By a miracle I fell upon a ledge only a few feet below, and there I lay, sheltered from the fearful gale, yet without a hope in my soul.

“But the storm passed quickly, and when the snow dust ceased to blow I found that the ledge on which I had fallen was a sort of landing at the head of a great flight of steps carved in the ice. Oh, but they were old—those steps. I think they were cut a hundred centuries ago. Some were broken quite away.

“But there was no way up, so I had to go down. By good fortune I had kept hold of my

ice axe, and with the help of that I made my way down. My face I kept to the cliff so that giddiness should not cause me to fall.

“Hour after hour I climbed downwards. A hundred times I was near to falling, but always I was saved. At last I came into the thick fog-cloud and here it was not so cold. I rested and ate some chocolate which I had in my pocket, and went on again. And then—then I came suddenly to the end of the stairs.”

Anton paused, and the boys sat silent, almost breathless.

Presently the young Frenchman went on again. “I cried, I raved, as I looked downwards into that terrible deep. It seemed too cruel that I should have spent all these hours in vain. For a moment I was minded to fling myself down and end my troubles. It would, I thought, be better than remaining there to die of cold and hunger. I was on a ledge, and at last I began to climb along it. It was smooth and narrow and wet with the mist. My heart was—how do you say?—in my feet, as I climbed.

“At last, just when I was close to the utter despair, I saw a hole. It was the mouth of a passage entering the face of the cliff. I entered, and, behold, fresh steps leading downwards endlessly! Again I began the descent. It was dark, but my electric torch gave me light to find my way, and here the steps, unlike those above, were broad and firm.

“Now and again I arrived at openings through which came the daylight. They were like the windows of this cave house, and I could see that all had been made by the hands of men—but of men who lived when the world was yet young. And so at last I won to the bottom of that great depth, and stepped out on to green grass, and into a warmth incredible.”

Again the speaker paused.

“The grass and the warmth startled us a bit, I can tell you,” put in Monty. “So did the beasts we met.”

“Ah, you have seen them—the Ape People!” exclaimed Anton.

“Seen them, yes, and slain about fifty of ’em,” answered Monty.

Anton’s dark eyes gleamed. “But that is splendid. They are the curse of the valley.”

“They seem to be dangerous brutes,” agreed Dick, “and they have more sense and pluck than any monkeys I have ever heard of before.”

“They are not monkeys,” replied Anton, quickly. “They are men.”

“Men!” cried Monty.

“But yes. You will see if you stay here a little time.”

“But they look like apes—not men,” objected Dick.

“It is the hair that covers them which has deceived you. They are, I think, what you would call ‘The Missing Link,’ but whether they

are men who have gone back, or monkeys who are becoming men—that I do not know. They are cunning, I tell you, incredibly cunning and brutal, and they are a terrible enemy of the Feather Men.”

“Oh, you call them Feather Men, too,” said Monty. “We had named them that already. Who are they, and where do they come from?”

“Wait, Monty,” put in Dick. “One thing at a time. We have not yet heard how Monsieur Anton came safely to this cave.”

Anton shrugged his shoulders. “It was a miracle like the rest,” he answered. “On that day, as happens sometimes, the fog dropped low upon the valley and I wandered, lost in the thick mist, and longing that it would clear. Yet, as I now know, it was the fog, and the fog alone, that saved me from the ape people’s sentinels who watch always from the high ledges.

“I came to a wall, climbed across it, and dropped down nearly on top of a monstrous beast that frightened from me nearly all the little life remaining in my weary body. I knew not then, as I know now, that it was nothing but one of these great lizard-like creatures which the Feather Men keep for food. As I fled, I ran into a party of the Feather Men who were cutting grass, and then I fainted. When I came to, I found myself safe in this cave.”

“So they keep these beasts tame? I thought so,” said Monty.

"That is so, monsieur," replied Anton. "At one time they seem to have had great herds of them, and to have cultivated the whole valley. But that was before the days of the Ape Folk."

Monty was all excitement. "What—did the apes come from somewhere else?" he demanded.

"It would seem so," answered Anton, "but I do not know for certain, for this fight has been going on for very many years. Myself, I believe that there was once another valley not far away where the Ape Folk dwelt, but that some great storm or earthquake drove them out, and that a few survivors reached this place. Here they have multiplied until to-day they outnumber the Feather Folk ten to one, and in the end must destroy them utterly."

"Ugh!" exclaimed Dick. "What brutes they must be! It strikes me, Monsieur Anton, that the sooner we have you safe in the 'plane the better. Then if we have enough petrol left we will fly away from this terrible place and deliver you safely to your father aboard the *Penguin*."

Anton stiffened. "What, monsieur! Do you suggest that we should leave these little people to the mercy of their enemies?"

Dick merely stared. This point of view had not occurred to him.

"I owe them my life," continued Anton. "I do not leave until I see them in safety."

Dick whistled softly. Here was trouble of a nature which he had never foreseen.

CHAPTER XXV

THE PERIL OF THE APES

“You would not expect it,” went on Anton, in a milder tone. “You, as Englishmen, do not desert your benefactors. These little folk have been kind to me. They have given me of their best; they have nursed and tended me. But it is to me that they look for some plan to deliver them from the Ape Folk, and I could not disappoint them.”

Monty struck in. “I quite see what you mean, monsieur, and I think you are right. But surely here, in this cave house, the Feather People are safe from these monkey creatures?”

“They are safe just so long as they keep their gates shut and the watch towers manned,” replied Anton, bitterly.

“What?” exclaimed Monty. “You don’t mean that those brutes of apes would venture near that great fire fountain just out in the valley?”

“It is true that, so far, they have not tried it. But each day they come nearer, and all here believe that they are gradually losing their fear of the fire. Since they took the Great House they have become astonishingly bold.”

"The Great House—what is that?" asked Dick.

"Pardon me. I forget that you as yet know nothing of what has happened in the valley," said Anton. "This place in which we are is the last refuge of the Feather Folk. Formerly they had a number of cave houses, all of them larger than this. One by one these were rushed by the apes, and every soul in them killed except a few who got away in fogs. But the last and most terrible loss was that of what they called 'The Great House.' It lies farther up the valley and is of great size and, I understand, beautifully carved and ornamented. It held a colony of over a thousand of the Feather Folk. I do not yet understand quite how the apes gained entrance. All I know is that they did so, and that of the inhabitants barely fifty escaped with their lives."

"But this is extraordinary!" exclaimed Dick. "These people seem so civilized. I cannot understand how mere apes can have ousted them."

"You will understand better when you have been here longer," replied Anton. "The Feather Folk have been here so long that they have become small and gentle, and, to tell you the truth, rather cowardly. When the apes first arrived our friends had been leading a comparatively easy life for so many ages that they had lost the art of fighting."

"But those two who came to meet us were plucky enough little chaps," objected Monty.

"That is so," agreed Anton. "Glij and Klin,

as they are called, are of the new race. All their lives they have been fighting the apes. They and other young men have plenty of pluck. Yet even to them the apes are a perfect nightmare, and I think they would face anything rather than those horrid beasts."

"I should have thought the other valley pests were a sight worse," said Monty. "When we were fighting the apes a thing like a centipede, but about fifty feet long, turned up. It fairly put the wind up the apes."

"A centipede fifty feet long—more than fifteen metres, but that is terrible!" exclaimed Anton. "The spiders, yes, I have seen them of a size enormous, but never such a creature as that."

"I hope there are not many of them," said Monty, dryly. "It took a bomb to finish the brute. Anyhow, it was worse than the apes."

Anton shook his head. "It proves how terribly the valley is going back," he said. "Before the apes came the Feather People, so they tell me, had cleared all the upper valley of monsters, and the few that remained hid in the hot caves in the lower end. But now that the apes rule and the Feather Folk are forced to remain within their rock shelters, these pests have grown bolder and are invading the upper grounds."

"Let's hope they'll invade the apes," said Monty, but Anton shook his head again.

"Alas! no," he said. "The Ape People can always save themselves by climbing."

"But, Monsieur Anton," said Dick, "what I cannot understand is how the Feather Folk live at all. How do they get their food if they are afraid to venture out into the valley?"

"Oh, they will not starve," replied Anton, quickly. "Not so long as they have their mushroom beds."

"Mushrooms! Surely they don't live on mushrooms?" said Dick.

"But indeed they do," replied the other. "You forget that they have been cultivating fungi of all sorts for thousands of years. They have a variety unknown in other parts of the world. They also have large fish-ponds underground in which they grow eyeless fish, and they trap birds on the ledges. Besides that, they still keep a number of curious animals resembling the manatee or dugong in artificial ponds, and from these they get milk—very good milk, too, I assure you. But these things and others you will see for yourselves."

"They are wonderful people," said Dick, soberly, "and I begin to see how anxious you must be to rid them of these abominable ape things."

Anton nodded gravely. "I am happy to hear you say that," he answered; "for if you and monsieur, your brother, will help I think that it will be done."

Monty broke in. "Then if we are to be partners, monsieur, the first thing to do is to cut out the misters," he said, with a laugh. "I'm just Monty, if you please."

"But that is charming of you," smiled back the young Frenchman. "Then I, too, will be Anton, if you will permit it." He clapped his hands. "We have talked enough for the time," he said; "and both of you look fatigued. I will ask that a meal shall be brought to you, and then you must rest."

"I could do with some grub," grinned Monty; "and I think I could sleep for about twenty-four hours."

"But there is Jean," put in Dick. "Remember we cannot leave Jean Breguet alone in the *Falcon*."

"Indeed, no," said Anton. "He must come in and get refreshment and rest. Glij and another man will guard the 'plane and call you if danger threatens. The apes, as I have told you, have never yet ventured past the fire fountain, and I do not think that they will dare to do so for the present, especially since you have given them such a sharp lesson as you did yesterday."

At this moment one of the Feather Folk pushed back the curtain over the doorway, and bowed.

Anton spoke to him in the curious twittering tongue which so greatly puzzled the boys, and, bowing, he stood waiting. "He will take you down to the entrance," Anton explained. "Then a guard will be put over the 'plane. I suggest that you should bring the machine as close as possible to the entrance of the cave house. I think I can promise you it will be safe there."

As the two boys followed their guide down the long flights of rock stairs eyes peered at them from various openings. "Must be a bit of excitement for them," said Monty to Dick. "The 'plane, I mean. Just think of their having lived here all these centuries without ever having anything to do with the rest of the world! Isn't it wonderful?"

"It's pretty amazing," allowed Dick, "and immensely interesting. But what's worrying me is these apes."

Monty nodded. "They're the very mischief. But between us we must knock out a plan for finishing them. How I wish we'd got a few poison gas bombs. They'd do the trick quick enough."

"Poison gas!" repeated Dick, thoughtfully. "Yes, I wish we had. But as we haven't, we shall have to rely on our rifles and the few Mills' bombs that we've brought along."

"If the 'plane was only right, and we had plenty of petrol, we'd fly back to the ship for help," said Monty.

"But it isn't, and we haven't even enough for the back trip," replied Dick, rather grimly. And then they came to the main entrance, where Jean was waiting.

They got the 'plane close in; they left their two men, Glij and a friend, in charge of her, then went back to Anton's room for the promised meal.

It was the most extraordinary they had ever

sat down to. Dishes and plates were not unlike European, only all were made of a white metal. This metal seemed to be aluminium, and Anton told them that the Feather People were able to alloy it so as to make it hard enough for knife blades or soft enough to hammer into shape.

Unless they had been told that the first dish was a sort of fungus they would have taken it for veal. After this came excellent grilled fish, which tasted rather like fresh whiting, and a third dish resembled mashed potatoes. To drink they had a fizzy stuff, not unlike ginger beer, and big jugs of milk.

The odd thing was that there was no bread and nothing sweet. The Feather People, it seemed, used to have both. Bread they had once made out of the pounded seed of a sort of grass, and for a sweet dish they had the juice of a plant like a small sugar-cane. But now that the apes roamed the whole of the valley they had been forced to give up their open-air farming, and had been left without bread, sugar, or fresh vegetables.

But what food they had was good and well cooked, and after the meal was finished three little couches were brought in, with mattresses stuffed with soft grass, and blankets woven of hair. Inside five minutes there were no three people on earth sleeping more soundly than Dick, Monty and Jean Breguet.

CHAPTER XXVI

AT CLOSE QUARTERS

MONTY was roused by some one shaking him sharply, and opening his eyes he saw Dick bending over him. "Get up, Monty," he said, sharply. "There's trouble."

Monty stared vaguely a moment, then shot to his feet. "What, the apes again?"

"Yes, word has been brought that they are gathering beyond the gas fountain. Anton says that it is the 'plane which is attracting them. They are full of curiosity, he tells me, and at the same time seem to have sense enough to know that the 'plane is dangerous to them. He thinks they are trying to summon up courage for an attack."

"Attack, will they? We'll teach 'em," growled Monty, as he quickly pulled on his boots. "Got the rifles, Dick?"

"Yes, we brought them in. Come along, if you are ready."

"Don't spare them!" cried Anton as the three hurried out. "Remember that for every one you kill you are saving the lives of our friends here."

"Right you are, Anton!" called back Monty. "We'll give them beans!"

Sure enough, when they got outside there were grey forms slinking about at a distance of about a quarter of a mile.

To the amazement of the Feather Folk, who were terrified at this new invasion, the two boys and Jean at once loaded their rifles and started straight out. Glij, however, and several others of the younger men took their bows and short swords and offered to accompany them.

But Dick made signs to them to remain by the 'plane, and he and his two companions walked on. A slight mist hung across the floor of the valley, hiding the opposite cliffs, but on this side the white glare of the gas fountain showed up everything clearly. And its heat was so great that there was no mist within a pretty wide radius all around it. So intense indeed was the heat that Dick and his companions had to keep a good distance away from the spot where the great spout rushed screaming from the ground.

The apes, when they saw the three coming, seemed every bit as much astonished as the Feather Folk. It was generations since any of the valley people had dared to face them, and they could not make it out at all. Their advance guards, great grey shaggy brutes, began to drop back slowly.

Jean stopped and put his rifle to his shoulder, but Dick raised his hand. "No, Jean, it's a long range, and we mustn't waste cartridges. Besides, what's the use of killing one or two

when there are hundreds or perhaps thousands? We must use our brains to trap the brutes, and wipe out a real big bunch at a time."

Monty meantime had had his glasses on the apes. He dropped them and turned eagerly to his brother. "I say, Dick, there are a lot on this side of the river, but the big army of them that we fought with are on the far side. I wonder how they cross?"

"They cross by a bridge a long way up the valley," replied Dick, "one the Feather Folk built ever so long ago. Anton told me that."

Monty's eyes gleamed. "Then I believe we can get the whole bunch of them!" he exclaimed.

"How?"

"With the 'plane. What I suggest is that we go back to the 'plane and fly her out. We'll drive them back towards the river with her; then, when we've bunched them together on the bank, chuck a bomb or two. That ought to put the fear into them."

Dick looked thoughtful. "It might work," he allowed.

"I'm sure it would work," declared Monty, "And it'll be a case of 'Thrice blessed is he who gets his blow in fust.' If we can only put the wind up them at once, it'll make subsequent operations a lot easier."

"You are right there," replied Dick. "The only question is whether they won't scatter as soon as they see the 'plane."

But Monty had his answer ready. "They can't run fast on the flat ground. I'll bet we can round them up."

"We'll try it," said Dick, with decision, and turning they went back. A chorus of hoarse barking cries came from the distance.

"They think we're running away," grinned Monty.

"That ees true," growled Jean. "And zey do chase us."

It was a fact. The great grey beasts were advancing. Dick, glancing back, looked grave. "They are coming," he said, curtly. "Don't hurry, any of you. And be ready to fire if any approach too closely."

The apes had formed in a wide semicircle, the outer horns of which were rapidly closing in. The Feather Folk had seen what was happening and were evidently calling to their friends to hurry. But their cries were drowned by the shriek of the gas fountain.

"Keep close as you can to the big blaze," ordered Dick. "I don't think those grey brutes will venture near it. But look out for their slipping in between us and the cliff."

"Zat ees just vat zey are doing!" snapped Jean. "And eef zey get to ze 'plane before us, eet is—how you say?—all up!"

Dick's quick eyes had seen already what was happening. "Run!" he snapped. "It's our only chance."

Refreshed with their long sleep, the three ran like hares. But as they tore past the gas fountain, they could already see grey forms slinking rapidly along the base of the cliff. The Feather Folk, in panic, had bolted inside the cave. No, not all, for half a dozen young men were still outside, waiting with their bows ready.

Three—no, four—of the great apes were coming from the upper side. These had dropped down from their usual upright position and were running on all-fours like dogs, and running very fast, too. Dick saw that he would not be in time. He pulled up short. "Let 'em have it!" he cried, and raising his rifle fired.

But running had unsteadied him, and though his bullet got home, it only broke the leg of the first ape. The brute gave a horrid roar, fell, then got up but fell again. The other three came on faster than ever. They were terribly close to the 'plane.

Monty and Jean both fired, and the next ape collapsed. Dick fired again, but missed. "Steady, you chaps. We've got to get them," he cried. Three more shots crackled out, and the other two apes went down.

"Good! Now come on!" shouted Dick.

There were loose rocks lying close under the cliff foot. Unnoticed, the wounded ape had dropped behind these, and full of savage lust for revenge, had crawled forward. Just as Dick and Monty came up, the brute sprang from its hiding-

place right into the little knot of Feather Folk who had remained on guard. He seemed to rise like a great grey demon among them, and all that Dick and Monty saw was that he had one in his terrible hands.

The little man's shrill scream rose high above the piercing whistle of the gas fountain. Then Dick was on the spot, and as he dared not fire he smote desperately at the monster with the butt of his rifle. The blow was so heavy that it jarred Dick's arms, but the only result was that the thing dropped its first victim and turned on Dick.

The creature's deep-set eyes glowed with a horrid fire; Dick saw its huge mouth open, and instinctively raised his rifle in both hands to save his throat from the long yellow fangs. The ape seized the rifle and snatched it away as easily as Dick himself could have taken the weapon from a child. Dick heard the stock crack as the brute's grasp contracted.

Then—it all happened in a matter of seconds—one of the little men leapt in behind. Dick saw the flash of his sharp sword, blue in the glare of the great flame. With amazing pluck the little man drove it home in the ape's side, and roaring, the creature turned upon its new enemy. A rifle cracked almost against Dick's ear. It was Monty's, and this was the end. The bullet shattered the great ape's head, and the huge sinewy body dropped writhing to the ground.

"Close call!" gasped Monty. "I say, that

was Glij who saved you. But there's no time to thank him now. There are more apes coming up on the lower side, and if we don't stop 'em they'll have the 'plane. Jump into the cabin, Dick, and get another rifle."

As Dick sprang up into the cabin of the 'plane he heard his brother's and Jean's rifles rattling like machine-guns. He was back in a moment with a spare rifle and rejoined them.

"It's all right!" sang out Monty. "We've stopped 'em. Now for the 'plane, Dick." Signing to the Feather Men to take themselves and their wounded comrade inside, Monty made for the 'plane. Dick and Jean followed, and in another few moments the door was tightly closed and the engine started.

"Keep her on the ground as long as you can, Dick," said Monty, in his brother's ear, and, nodding, Dick sent the big machine careering across the flat open space surrounding the gas fountain. "There they are!" cried Monty. "A hundred or more of them."

"I see them," answered Dick. "Now I'm going to try to round them up. But, Monty"—Dick's face was very set and stern as he glanced up at his brother—"we're chancing everything. If the brutes refuse to be cowed—if they face us—we may kill half a dozen, but they'll be bound to get us in the end."



*As the ape seized the rifle and snatched it away one of the little
men leapt in behind.*

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CHAPTER XXVII

SLAUGHTER

"ZEY do not like it." It was Jean who spoke.
"Zey are going back."

Jean was right. The apes, startled by this wide-winged, roaring monster that swooped so swiftly across the plain, had begun to turn tail. A few only, and these old grim warriors, stood their ground, and seemed to be endeavouring to encourage the rest to stand.

Dick checked the 'plane and Monty and Jean both opened fire. Four of the leaders fell, then, as the 'plane came roaring down upon them, the rest turned tail and, dropping on all fours, galloped off up-stream as hard as they could go. "Keep 'em going, Dick," shouted Monty in his ear. "We'll bag the lot if we go on like this."

"You look out for the bridge," replied Dick.
"That's what they're making for."

"I'm watching," Monty answered, and fired again.

"Zere is a vair big lot of zem, Monsieur Monty," said Jean. "More and more—zey keep coming. I sink zere is a hondred of zem."

"All of that," replied Monty. "If we can

wipe all these out, our Feather friends are going to be jolly pleased."

Jean was right. It was clear that a large force of the Ape Folk had crossed the river, for the crowd of fugitives kept on growing until a grey herd more than a hundred strong was galloping wildly along the river-bank. Monty's sharp eyes spotted the fact that, hard pressed as they were, none took the water. Indeed, not one ventured within several yards of the water's edge.

"Zere is ze bridge," cried Jean, suddenly, and pointed to a spot about half a mile away where, through the thin silvery haze, a graceful arch was just visible, spanning the steaming stream.

"I see it," cried Monty. "Lift her, Dick. We've got to get there ahead of the monkeys and cut 'em off."

"Blow up the bridge, you mean?" said Dick.

"That's it! Then, with any luck, we'll get the whole bunch. Give us a bomb, Jean."

Up went the 'plane, whizzing close over the heads of the panic-stricken apes. In a matter of seconds she had dropped again, close to the near end of the bridge.

Bomb in hand, Monty flung open the door of the cabin and leapt out. He glanced at the apes, but the nearest were still two or three hundred yards away.

"Time enough," he said, coolly, and, running forward, twisted the pin of his bomb, and flung the little steel globe straight on to the arch of

the bridge. It burst with a rending roar, and the centre arch, broken clean in two, toppled in ruins into the deep dark water below, turning the whole surface into yeasty foam.

The apes, startled by the crash, checked and bunched. Then suddenly there came from them a deep growling note, and one and all they raced towards the 'plane at redoubled speed.

"They understand," shouted Monty. "They know what's happened. Look out, Dick! Look out, Jean! The brutes mustn't get hold of the 'plane. They're desperate." As he spoke he was scrambling rapidly back into the cabin. But quick as he was, the apes were as quick. Driven to desperation, they had evidently made up their minds to attack.

"Get her going again, Dick," yelled Monty, and as he spoke Jean's rifle was rattling like a machine-gun. The 'plane began to move. Jean shot at a monster that was grabbing at the under carriage. Then the *Falcon* drew clear. "Wheel her, Dick!" roared Monty. "Circle them. Now's our chance for a bomb."

"Be careful!" cried back Dick, in terror. "You'll blow us all up, if you're not careful."

But Monty was already at the open window with another bomb in his hand. His lips were tightly pressed together, his eyes shining as he watched the hideous horde. Their leaders had faced the circling 'plane, and all now were thickly

bunched together, with their backs towards the broken bridge.

Dick, watching as keenly as Monty himself, checked the 'plane again, and cool as ice Monty pulled the pin and flung the bomb. It fell in the very centre of the thickly crowded group, and the explosion at such close quarters made the *Falcon* quiver in every strut. But happily no damage was done, and she drew away again.

"My word!" gasped Jean, "but you 'ave killed many."

It was true—so true that Monty shuddered at the result. The survivors, paralysed with fear, had bolted wildly for the ruins of the bridge.

"Look out, Dick!" cried Monty, as he snatched up his rifle. "Turn her. Jean, let 'em have it. Remember that for every one we kill, we're saving the lives of a dozen of the Feather Folk."

The apes, now fairly panic-stricken, were crowding on the broken end of the bridge, while the foremost were making wild leaps in an attempt to cross the gap. But the opening was nearly twenty feet wide, and not one in five reached the far side. Most of those that did fell to rifle bullets, for now the *Falcon* was at rest, and Dick, too, had taken up his rifle. He, Jean, and Monty were all firing as rapidly as they could load and pull trigger.

It was a grim and dreadful sight. Knowing what detestable brutes these apes were and the



"Look out, Di," shouted Monty. "The brutes mustn't get hold of the 'plane."

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age-long misery they had inflicted upon the poor little Feather Folk, Dick—and Monty, too—felt that they were merely destroying something so evil that it had no right to live.

The worst of the business was the fate of the apes that fell into the river. The water was alive with horrid reddish tentacles, no doubt belonging to the same octopus-like creatures one of which had seized Dick on his first visit to the river. The body of an ape had hardly touched the surface before it was dragged down into the depths.

The three fired and fired till their rifle-barrels were too hot to touch, and until there was not a single ape left alive on their side. Out in the distance, on the far side of the river, they saw another ape army moving, shadow-like, in the thin mist, and heard howls of rage and fury. The half-dozen or so who had escaped by leaping the gap were apparently telling their fellows of the disaster that had befallen them.

When at last it was all over, Monty turned to his brother. "A good riddance," he said, grimly. "And now, see here, Dick, we've got to go up to the top of the valley and see if there are any more on this side."

"But the petrol, Monty. We're running terribly short."

"It can't be helped, old chap. In any case, we haven't enough to fly back to the *Penguin*. And if we can only clear this side of the valley

of apes, it's going to give the Feather Folk a fresh start. From what Anton said, the bridge is the only way of crossing in the whole length of the valley."

Dick shrugged his shoulders. "All right," he said, in a resigned tone. "But it's beginning to look to me as though we were going to spend the rest of our lives in this place."

As he spoke, he took his seat at the controls, the roar of the exhaust again sent wild echoes beating from cliff to cliff, and the big machine began to taxi rapidly across the fungus-sown turf. When they came to a wall, Dick lifted her over, and they sped rapidly up the river, keeping parallel with it and fairly close to the bank.

Many of the fields were ruined by the giant moles, but here and there they saw one of the vast lizard-like creatures grazing. There were many birds, including a giant skua with a six-foot stretch of wing, and once or twice they saw other animals quite strange to them. But they had no time to spend on these. It was apes they were after. At last, some ten miles up river, they spotted two of the ugly grey brutes slinking along under a wall, and to their horror one was carrying over his shoulder the dead and mutilated body of a Feather Man. Where the latter had come from Monty could not even guess, but he felt a savage satisfaction in putting a nickel-tipped bullet through the hideous beast's head, while Jean shot down the other.

Then Dick rose, and they zigzagged up and down, working always southwards towards the head of the valley. The distance was well over twenty miles, and everywhere the same tremendous walls of cliff rose on either side. Then the walls began to close in, the valley narrowed, and Monty's sharp eyes caught a darkness ahead. "Down with you, Dick!" he cried. "Here's the top of the valley."

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN THE MOUTH OF THE CAVERN

“WHY, here’s the river as big as ever!” exclaimed Monty. The *Falcon* had been brought to earth not far from the southern cliff wall and, after a careful survey of the country, Monty and Jean had ventured out on the ground, leaving Dick in charge of the ‘plane.

Monty and Jean both carried their rifles, but there did not seem to be anything in the neighbourhood of a dangerous character. “I sink ze river do come, whole, out of ze cliff,” said Jean.

“We’ll have a look,” said Monty. “And I want to take a squint at the cliffs as well, so as to see if the apes can cross up at this end.”

Jean stared up at the towering buttresses of dark rock, and shook his head. “Ze rocks, zey hang right over,” he answered. “Nossing but ze bird can cross zem.”

“I believe you’re right,” allowed Monty. “And now where does this funny river come from?” He led the way around the bottom of a gigantic buttress of rock, and on the other side they found themselves close to the river, but high above it. They were in a narrow gorge, the sides of which towered endlessly into the mist and the bottom

of which was occupied by the river rushing in foam through a deep and rocky bed. At a little distance beyond, the gorge ended abruptly in the mouth of a gigantic cavern, the arch of which rose at least a hundred feet above their heads. Out of this monstrous cavern the strange river poured with a dull roar.

"I sink ze water comes from ze bottom of ze ice," said Jean, sagely.

"If it does, what makes it so warm?" asked Monty. "But come on, Jean. It's not bad walking. Let's go as far as the mouth of the cave."

Jean looked doubtful. "I sink him a bad place," he answered. "I sink we better go back, Monsieur Monty."

"Nonsense!" replied Monty, impatiently. "I must have a look at this cave. Why, it's the most wonderful place I ever saw."

"Ze nastiest, I sink," grumbled Jean. "'Ow eef zere are ze apes 'ere?"

"Then it's up to us to kill them. But I don't think there are," replied Monty.

Jean pointed towards the dark mouth of the cavern. "It ees a bad place," he said, with unusual gravity. "I feel heem in my bones."

"Oh, don't croak so!" burst out Monty. "After all, I only want to look round the next corner. Listen, Jean. You wait here with your rifle, and if you see anything suspicious, fire a shot. I'll just go round that corner of rock and get a glimpse into the cave itself; then I'll come straight back."

To this Jean agreed, though not willingly, and Monty pushed on alone. The corner of rock of which he had spoken was a big buttress which jutted out half the distance between the side of the gorge and the river, and all that Monty wanted was to pass round the end of it so as to get a full view of the cave itself. He went cautiously, for in spite of what he said, he was secretly impressed by Jean's warning.

Rounding the buttress, he found himself actually under the enormous arch of the cave-mouth. He stopped and stared up the vast tunnel out of which the river tumbled, and secretly longed to explore its tremendous recesses. All of a sudden his eyes were caught by something only a few feet above his head to the right, something which glowed in the dusk of the cave-mouth with a soft, phosphorescent light.

"Why, it's a stone!" he said in amazement. Then another idea flashed through his mind. "A diamond!" he gasped, and, forgetting everything else, laid his rifle against a rock and began to try to reach the glowing stone. He could not get at it, direct, but going on a few steps found a sort of fissure which looked as if it might offer a way up, and, getting a good grip with his hands, started to climb. It was not easy, but after a struggle he reached a ledge some six feet up, and stopped to get breath and see how he could get across to his prize.

Happening to look up, he saw another gleaming

stone, and then, high above that, two tiny red sparks set close together, which puzzled him completely. He stared at them. "I do believe they are eyes," he said to himself, "but what creature could possibly be hanging up there on the bare rock?"

At this moment a slight sound below attracted his attention, and, looking down, he saw a great whitish beast slinking along the base of the rock. It was coming towards him from the interior of the cave, and dim as the light was, there was enough to show Monty that the thing was an ape. But an ape completely different from those he had seen down in the valley. This brute was larger than any of them, and standing erect must have been nearly seven feet high. Also, its hair was not grey, but almost snow-white, and very long. It was walking on all fours.

To say that Monty was scared is putting it mildly. He actually gave himself up for lost, for there was his rifle out of reach, and he himself had nothing but a sheath knife with which to defend himself against the monster. Nor was it any use calling to Jean, for even if Jean heard—and that was not likely with the river roaring as it was—Jean could never get up in time. Long before he could reach the spot the ape would have raked Monty off his narrow perch and killed him with its tremendous hands and teeth.

Luckily for himself, Monty's nerves were good,

and it was always when in the tightest place that his brain worked most quickly. Watching the ape, he realized that the huge beast had not yet seen him, and this gave him a gleam of hope. A precious faint one, it is true, but still a chance.

On the other hand the creature certainly realized that there was something strange about, for it was sniffing the air. Monty saw its great head move from side to side in a curiously uneasy fashion, and he himself simply froze to the rock ledge where he was clinging, hardly daring to breathe for fear of making some sound which the ape might catch.

By this time his eyes had become more accustomed to the gloom which prevailed in this narrow cleft, and he was able to see better. And presently he saw something which made him a little more hopeful. The ape's eyes were large, but they were white and filmy, and like a flash it came to Monty that the beast was blind.

This ape, for some reason or other, must have been driven out by the rest, and had taken refuge in this wild place, or else, perhaps, it belonged to another race of apes that lived in the darkness of the great cave, and which were all blind, like other cave-dwelling creatures. Anyhow, it was quite clear that it could not see.

On the other hand, its powers of scent were probably keener than that of its sighted fellows, and it was quite plain that it had winded something unusual. It stopped almost immediately beneath

Monty's narrow perch and kept swinging its head to and fro.

To Monty each second as it dragged by seemed like an hour of agony. The most ghastly part of the whole business was that he could do nothing to help himself, but only wait while his hideous enemy groped about so close beneath him that the rank smell of it rose to his nostrils.

Presently Monty saw for certain that the creature had at least some idea of where he was, for rising slowly to an upright position, it began to grope upwards across the rock with long hairy hands. Its fingers were within a few inches of Monty's feet; another moment and they would close on them. Glancing round in sheer despair, Monty saw a spike of rock jutting out immediately above him. It was almost out of reach, and even if he did reach it, the odds were all against his being able to hold on to it or draw himself up. But it was do or die and, nerved by sheer panic, Monty made a wild leap, got both hands round the rock, and swung himself frantically up.

Somehow he got foothold of a kind, and next moment was seated astride of the rock spur. He looked down to see that the ape had started to follow. Being blind it had to grope for hold, which made it slow; yet, even so, it could be only a question of a few minutes before it must reach him, and again Monty looked wildly round for any sort of refuge.

Fate was kind. He saw a deep crack close

by. It was desperately narrow, but somehow he forced himself into it, and squeezed himself right into the very back of it. Then he pulled out his sheath-knife and opened it. It was a forlorn hope, but the only one left. At the same time he shouted at the top of his voice for Jean, but he knew that the chances were all against Jean hearing. The din of the river thundering in its deep bed directly beneath was so great that it drowned all other sounds.

With his face close to the opening of his narrow refuge, Monty looked down to see that the great ape had found a hand hold, and was drawing itself up. There was something inexpressibly horrible in the way it climbed. So slowly, yet so dreadfully steadily. And what made it even worse was the sight of those terrible white, blind eyes so close beneath.

"It's all up," was the thought that framed itself in Monty's mind. "What an idiot I was not to take Jean's advice!"

But though cold despair had seized him, Monty still kept his head and, running his finger over the blade of his knife to test its edge, he made up his mind that he would not go under without a struggle.

CHAPTER XXIX

SAVED BY A SPIDER

THE ape, whose powers of scent and hearing evidently made up for its blindness, came steadily upwards. Quite plainly it knew exactly where Monty crouched in his narrow recess. The crack in the rock was so narrow that Monty was quite unable to get the whole of his body inside it, and even if he could have done so he knew very well that the ape's long arm could reach him and pluck him out as easily as he could have pulled a cork from a bottle.

True, he had his knife, but he could hardly hope that, even with this, he could hold off his monstrous enemy. The great beast came nearer. Its groping hands reached the jutting point of rock by which Monty himself had climbed to his present position, and like a flash it was up and on it.

Now it was almost within arm's length of Monty, and his fingers tightened on the blade of his sheath-knife. Hope had gone, but he meant to make a fight for it. Slowly the ape thrust its great right arm forward. The arm was a good yard in length, and under the coarse grey hair the muscles swelled like steel cables.

The sour reek of the brute struck Monty's nostrils, and sickened him. He raised his arm to strike.

As he did so, suddenly something was swinging between him and his terrible enemy—a thing like a large black crab, which was suspended at the end of a thin, glistening cord. It had appeared so swiftly, so silently, that for the moment Monty could not believe his eyes. He remained as still as a stone image, hardly breathing. The apparition was within a yard of his face, and exactly between him and the ape. As he stared at it, the thing spun half round and two glowing red specks caught his eyes.

In a flash he knew the truth.

This was a spider—a spider of a size that no naturalist had hitherto dreamt of. Yes, he saw it now, with its evil-looking head, and its long hairy legs curved in close to its body.

But the ape, being blind, had, of course, not seen it. Perhaps it sensed some danger, for it seemed to hesitate a moment. Its hesitation, however, lasted only for a second or two, then, bending its great body forward, it thrust its clutching fingers straight towards Monty. But, instead of seizing Monty, the ape's hand met the spider.

Motionless up to now, the spider suddenly sprang into violent life. Quick as a flash it had escaped the long hairy fingers; it was on the ape's arm, and racing up towards its head.

The wretched ape must have known the nature



Suddenly something was swimming between him and his terrible enemy—a thing like a large black crab, which was suspended at the end of a thin glistening cord.

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of the enemy, and what would happen. Uttering a roar that was almost a scream, it made a desperate grasp at the spider with its left hand.

Whether it caught it or not, that Monty could not make out. The light here, under the cave arch, was so dim and the whole thing happened so quickly. What he did see was the ape tumbling over backwards. It fell the whole eight or nine feet to the rocks below, landing on them on its back with a tremendous thud.

It was a fall that would have killed a man, but the ape was up again in a moment, erect on its hind legs. It staggered like a drunken man and beat at itself with its hands, all the time screaming as if in mortal agony.

Monty watched the struggle with a horrible fascination. He could not move even to save his life. In a few moments the ape's cries ceased, and turned to groans. Then it fell down and writhed about in a dreadful fashion.

And just then Monty heard a shout, and looking round saw Jean in the act of rounding the big rock buttress to the left. "Shoot him! Shoot him!" shrieked Monty, and the words were hardly out of his mouth before Jean's rifle spoke, the report sending tremendous echoes clattering into the depths of the huge cavern. The ape straightened out, a tremor ran through its vast body, then it lay still.

Jean ran forward. "Look out for the spider!" Monty managed to cry, then the horror of it all

seized him, and he went quite limp, and lay helpless in his narrow cleft.

Next thing he knew Jean was beside him. "Are you 'urt, Monsieur Monty?" the good fellow was asking anxiously.

"N-not a bit, Jean," stammered Monty, hoarsely, "only scared nearly out of my wits! Ugh, that spider!"

Jean gave him a restorative, and presently Monty managed to pull himself together, and with Jean's help to climb down. But he would not wait even long enough to glance at the dead ape. He simply bolted back into the open, and it was with a sigh of the most intense relief that he found himself once more in safety in the cabin of the 'plane.

Dick gazed at him in amazement. "What have you been doing? What has happened?" he asked, sharply.

Monty shuddered. "Don't ask me. Take us back, Dick. I'll tell you later."

Dick was wise enough to realize that Monty had had a shock. He took his seat, started up the engines, and in a very few minutes the *Falcon* had come to rest as close as was safe to the roaring blaze of the great gas fountain.

CHAPTER XXX

ANTON'S PLAN

"YES, I have heard of the great white apes of the cavern," said Anton, "but they are not dangerous to the Feather Folk, for they never venture outside. Also there are but few of them."

He raised himself on his couch and his dark eyes brightened as he fixed them on Monty, who was reclining at his ease on a pile of rugs. "But you and your brother and Jean have done a splendid work," he exclaimed. "To-day, for the first time in their lives, many of the Feather Folk have been out into the open in broad daylight. Glij tells me that not an ape is visible upon this side of the river. I believe you have entirely cleared this side of the valley of the pests. We are all deeply grateful to you."

Monty laughed. "My dear chap, for goodness' sake don't talk any more about gratitude. The Feather People have been so grateful that Dick and I have presents enough to fill a railway van, let alone an aeroplane. And I've eaten so many good things the last two days that I shall have indigestion for a week."

This time it was Anton who laughed. "You

Englishmen amaze me," he said. "We French people like to be thanked."

Dick spoke. "I think we do, too, Anton, only we don't want too much said about it. So long as we know the other people are pleased, that's enough for us. But, see here, you asked us to come up and talk over plans. After all, our work is only half done. The apes are still thick on the far side of the river, and some day they'll find a way across. The question is, what are we going to do about it?"

"That is exactly what I wished to talk about," replied Anton, gravely. "It is your bombs that—how do you call it?—did the trick. Have you more?"

"Yes, we have a few more bombs," replied Dick, "but the question is how to use them. You're not going to get the apes to face us again as they did the other day, and anyhow, there is no river to pen them against."

"And, besides," put in Monty, "there are a heap more of them over on those ledges on the far side."

"All that I have thought of," replied Anton. "At nights I have lain awake, thinking over it all. It is difficult, yet with your aeroplane not impossible. Listen to me, and I will tell you what I believe is our plan. The stronghold of the apes is that place, high up, where they descended from the ledge on the first day of your arrival in the valley. The elders of the Feather Folk

declare that they all, or nearly all, live there in a great natural cavern which extends far into the cliff. Now if you could throw a bomb into the mouth of the cave, would it not block the entrance, and so imprison all these vile beasts in the heart of the rock ? ”

He paused and looked expectantly at the boys.

Monty whistled softly. “ Sounds pretty wholesale,” he observed ; “ but suppose they have another way out ? ”

Anton shook his head. “ I am told there is no other,” he answered.

“ Are you sure ? ” questioned Monty.

“ According to their records, which they keep engraved on the metal slabs in their library, and which contain maps of the whole valley and plans of all the caves, this particular cave has no lower exit. It is possible, of course, that it might have one much higher up the cliffs, at a height to which the Feather Folk have never been able to climb.”

Monty nodded thoughtfully. “ We should have to fly high and make sure of that,” he said.

Dick spoke. “ It’s all very well to talk of flying high and all that sort of thing, but do you know we have only six tins of petrol left ? ”

Anton looked dismayed. “ I had no idea you were so short as that. How far can you travel on such an amount ? ”

“ We could get up out of the valley. It would be enough to land the four of us and our stores safely on the ice-cap. If we use it for the purpose

of destroying these apes, then so far as I can see, we are doomed to remain in this abyss for the rest of our lives, for I do not suppose that we could ever climb out the way by which you came down, Anton, let alone carry our stores up by such a terrible road."

Anton did not answer for a moment. He lay quite still on his couch, and by the lines on his forehead was evidently thinking deeply. "This petrol," he said at last. "I know a little about it, but it is made from rock oil, is it not?"

"Yes," replied Dick, looking rather surprised. "That is so. It is distilled from petroleum."

"And if you had petroleum, have you the knowledge to distil it?"

"I know the process," answered Dick, "but I should require sulphuric acid and caustic soda for purifying purposes."

"The soda we could get, I know," said Anton, "and there is sulphur in plenty to be obtained in the valley."

"Yes, but what about the petroleum?" cut in Monty, quickly.

"I was going to tell you," replied Anton. "According to these records I speak of, there is a spring of 'fire oil,' as they call it, down near the lower end of the valley. But"—he paused for a moment—"it is on the far side of the river."

Monty gave a short, sharp laugh. "So we've got to wipe out the apes before we can get it?"

Then if we finish them off, we can get fuel to fly all the way back to the coast. Is that your notion, Anton ? ”

Anton did not laugh. “ You are right,” he replied, quietly. “ That is how the affair stands, and I leave it to you to make your choice.”

There was silence a moment in the warm, brightly-lit rock chamber. Dick broke it. He chuckled softly. “ It doesn't seem to me that you have left us much choice in the matter, Anton,” he said. “ Well, when is it to be ? Shall we take our trip across the valley to-morrow ? ”

“ The sooner the better,” said Monty. “ I've been loafing for two days and getting fat and bilious. I want some work. Besides, we mustn't wait until these brutes have got over their scare. Let's go to-morrow.”

CHAPTER XXXI

THE UPPER LEDGE

THE *Falcon* roared across the valley, sending the echoes from her exhaust throbbing and thundering up and down the vast rock walls that hemmed it in. Monty, looking back, could see a crowd of the Feather Folk, their metal head-dresses shining in the glare of the fire fountain, standing far out in the open, watching them. He knew how these little people were hoping and praying for their success, and the thought comforted him.

The artificers of the Feather Folk had been busy for two days past on the engine of the big 'plane, and Dick had found them amazingly clever. They had worked wonders with the scored pinions and shafts, so that the great machine was almost herself again, and was flying at quite her old speed. It was but a matter of a few minutes before she was sweeping along the cliff face, opposite the long ledge from which the apes had descended.

As the *Falcon* started, Monty had seen through his glasses that this ledge was lined with the great, ungainly grey shapes, but as she approached they had one and all bolted like rabbits, and vanished from sight.

Monty and Jean were gazing out through the right-hand side window, and Monty suddenly pointed to a dark patch in the cliff level with the ledge. "There's the hole," he exclaimed, quickly. "Not a very big one, either. If we could chuck a bomb into it, it would do the trick right enough."

Jean shook his head. "Ze ledge ees too narrow, and see 'ow ze rock, he does hang over above ze entrance. It ees no good, Monsieur Monty. We cannot come so near for to throw ze bomb."

Monty's face went suddenly grave. "By gum, but you're right, Jean. I never thought of that. With our breadth of wing, we can't get within fifty feet of the hole, and even with a bomb gun you couldn't be sure of hitting so small a space once in ten times."

He sprang across to Dick and told him.

Dick turned his head slightly. "It's what I was afraid of all along, only I didn't like to say so. My only hope was that the ledge might be wide enough to land on."

"Well, it isn't," said Monty, flatly. "Go higher, Dick. Seems to me there's just a chance that we might find a wider ledge up above. I was examining the cliff through the glasses, and the rocks looked very broken higher up."

"We'll try, Monty," was Dick's answer, "but to my mind, it's simply waste of petrol." As he spoke he turned the 'plane outwards from the cliff, and began to rise in a narrow spiral.

Monty's eyes were fixed upon the cliff face.

Up they went, and as they rose Monty saw that the rocks were more and more broken. It seemed to him that, in some past age, there must have been a landslide on a large scale at this particular point.

The *Falcon* was at nearly a thousand feet when Monty and Jean both shouted together. For suddenly there had opened out to view no ledge, but a great terrace fully a hundred feet in width and perhaps two hundred and fifty yards in length. And in the face of the rock at the back of this they saw the mouth of a large cavern.

"Here we are, Dick!" cried Monty, in his brother's ear. "Heaps of room to land, and a thundering big hole to chuck our bomb down!"

"It's just on the cards I might land there safely," said Dick, "but as for that hole, the odds are all against its having anything to do with the monkey cave."

"I feel perfectly certain it has," urged Monty. "Anyhow, let's try, Dick."

"And suppose it has, and the apes come out?" suggested Dick, grimly.

"We've got our bombs," returned Monty. "Surely to goodness one of them will stop any of the brutes from coming near the *Falcon*."

Dick smiled oddly. "Well, I don't mind trying it. But don't blame me if we come to grief." As he spoke he swung the 'plane again, and rose above the ledge. In his skilful hands the great machine seemed to hover for a moment like a wide-

winged bird. Then he cut out the engine and she swooped downwards.

For the moment even Monty held his breath, while Jean stood like a statue. They both knew the risks they were taking. Next instant the wheels took the rock, and the *Falcon* was on the ledge. She shot forward, bumping violently on the rough surface, and for a moment it seemed as though she would shoot right across it and pitch over the far end. If she did so she would almost certainly wreck herself against the rough cliff face, and there would be an end of everything so far as she and her crew were concerned. But Dick stopped her sharply, and she came to rest little more than her own length from the northern end of the terrace.

"Good for you, Dick!" cried Monty. "That was fine!" Then he had flung open the door and he and Jean, armed with rifles and bombs, were out and racing towards the mouth of the cavern.

Monty reached it first. "It goes right down," he said. "I knew I was right. I'll bet it leads to the apes' place below."

Jean, walking into the hole, stood sniffing the air. He nodded. "Mais oui, monsieur. Yes, I sink he goes down, for I can smell ze ape smell."

"My word, so can I. Yes, we're on the right track this time, Jean. The worst of it is that it must be a longish way above the main cave."

"Four hundred feet at least," came Dick's

voice from behind them. "The height of the cross of St. Paul's from the street. It's a long way to go down, Monty."

"It is," agreed Monty, quietly. "Yet we've got to do it. There's absolutely no other way of getting at the brutes."

Dick gazed at the dark tunnel which sloped down into the darkness. "Suppose they get behind you?" he suggested. "These cliffs are simply honeycombed."

Monty shrugged his shoulders. "We must take our chance, old chap. Anyhow, we've got our pistols." He produced a business-like automatic from an inside pocket as he spoke.

"Then who is to go?" asked Dick.

"Jean and I," replied Monty, quickly. "You must stay with the 'plane."

Dick still looked doubtful. "You may lose your way down that beastly burrow," he said.

"We shan't do that," Monty answered, confidently. "We shall run a thread behind us. And we've got an acetylene lamp and a rope. We're ready for anything that happens, Dick."

Dick looked at his brother. "It's a horrible job. I wish I could go instead of you," he said, in a low voice.

"But you can't," replied Monty, promptly. "It's all right, old chap. I shall be safe."

Dick nodded. "Don't be any longer than you can help," he said.

"We ought to be back in an hour or so. And,

anyhow, you'll hear the bump when the bomb goes off. By the by, you'd better keep an eye over the ledge in case any of the brutes come out by their front door. If you dropped a bomb from up here you could blow their paths away, and if you did that it would puzzle even an ape to get back into the valley."

"I'll keep my eyes open," Dick promised.

"Well, so long, old chap," were Monty's last words as he led the way down the tunnel.

"Look after him, Jean," said Dick, in a low voice to the Frenchman. "Don't let him run any bigger risks than you can help."

"You trust me, Monsieur Dick," whispered back Jean. "I vill see 'ee comes to no 'arm."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE HOLE IN THE FLOOR

THE passage dropped steeply, but though here and there they had to do a bit of scrambling, Monty and Jean found no occasion to use the rope. They were lucky in another way, for there were no loose stones, so they were able to move more quietly than they had expected.

Every few yards Monty would pause and listen intently, but he could not hear a sound. The silence was that of a vault. But the air was good, and since he and Jean could distinctly feel a slight draught blowing up from below, they were convinced that this passage joined the lower caves.

As they descended, the ape scent, which up at the top had been very faint, grew stronger. It was rank and most unpleasant, yet even this gave Monty some reassurance. He argued that, if the draught blew upwards, the apes would not be able to smell the invaders. He wondered if they had sense enough to know where the plane had gone, and if so to reason out why it had landed on the upper terrace.

Down they went—down and down into the darksome depths. They had no means of telling where they were, but at the end of a quarter

of an hour Monty felt sure that they had descended a matter of nearly three hundred feet. So far, the cave tunnel had not branched anywhere, and since the floor was clean Monty judged that the apes did not use the passage.

A little farther, and he discovered the reason, for suddenly the rock floor broke away into a sheer drop. Holding the light over the edge, Monty saw the bottom about thirty feet below.

"We must use the rope, Jean," he said, in the lowest possible whisper.

Jean nodded and pointed to a spur of rock around which he tied the rope. "I vill go first," he whispered, but Monty refused, and insisted on taking the lead.

He had his pistol ready in his coat pocket, but even so he felt anything but happy as he lowered himself down over the drop. But when he reached the bottom his electric torch showed nothing harmful. This cavern seemed completely deserted, and so far he had not seen even a lizard or a spider.

Jean came quickly after, but, of course, they had to leave the rope, for otherwise there would be no way of getting back. Not that the rope would be much use if they were chased back up this passage, and it made Monty's flesh creep to think of what would happen in such a case.

The passage, which so far seemed to have been slanting right into the cliff, now curved and ran outwards again. Consulting his pocket

compass, Monty made sure of this. A little farther, and for the first time since entering the cave, he heard a sound. He paused and listened breathlessly. "It's only water," he whispered, and Jean nodded.

Water it was. Through a tiny side passage a little stream of clear cool water ran out into the main tunnel and down its centre.

Monty and Jean followed it. It was not easy, for the passage was very steep indeed, and the water made the rock slippery. But somehow they managed to get on without falling. At last the walls opened out, and the two found themselves in a large cave. The floor was fairly smooth, but the roof, some thirty feet overhead, was hung with snowy stalactites which glistened in the strong glare of the acetylene lamp.

Monty looked carefully round. The ape smell was stronger than ever, yet he could see no sign of life in the cave. He turned to Jean. "We must be getting pretty near the level of the apes' cave," he whispered.

Jean nodded and pointed to the rivulet. "I sink zat is vat zey drink from," he answered. "Eef we follow heem, we find zem, perhaps."

Monty agreed, and they moved onwards beside the little tinkling stream.

All of a sudden they came to a circular hole in the floor through which the stream vanished. They could hear the sound of its fall as it splashed upon rock at some distance beneath.

Jean, who was carrying the lamp, was in the act of turning it on so as to throw its light down the opening, but Monty checked him. "Steady, Jean!" he said. "The ape smell is stronger than ever here. I've a notion that we're right above them."

"Ma foi, I sink you are right," replied Jean. "But 'ow can we tell eef we do not throw ze light down?"

"We may have to just now, but first let's listen a bit," said Monty. As he spoke he knelt down on the rock floor and peered over into the depths beneath. Presently he looked up. "Turn the lamp off, Jean. It seems to me it's not quite dark down below there."

Jean did so, and intense blackness fell upon them. There are few things so daunting as utter absence of light. In a cave like this the darkness is so complete that it seems to be solid.

But Monty gave no thought to this. He was gazing fixedly downwards, and as his eyes grew slowly accustomed to the darkness, he realized that there was light beneath. Very faint, it is true, but still enough to see a rock floor a long way down. It was another cave, a very large one, and exactly underneath the one which they had reached. Where the light came from, that Monty could not tell, but it was daylight which leaked in from somewhere.

He caught a gleam of it faintly reflected from the surface of a pool just beneath the opening, a

pool into which the stream fell with a rather pleasant tinkle of sound. Jean was kneeling beside Monty, staring down like him into the cavern beneath. Suddenly Monty clutched the Frenchman's arm. "Look!" he said, in a hissing whisper. "Look!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

MONTY'S RUSE

DIM and shadowy in the gloom below a great shaggy, dog-like figure had suddenly appeared beside the pool, and thrusting a cupped hand into the water was lifting it to its mouth and drinking. The tinkle of the little fall drowned any sound it might be making, but Monty could see it plainly enough, and so could Jean. "It is an ape," answered Jean. "Ah, and I can see ze more of zem."

Apes are imitative creatures, and when one drinks others usually follow. In this case three more of the big ungainly forms came lolloping up out of the gloom to the pool, and Monty could distinctly see others at a little distance. He rose to his feet, and drew Jean back a step or two from the opening. "It's the apes' cave, all right," he whispered, eagerly. "I expect the whole bunch are down there beneath us."

"I sink zat is so," agreed Jean. "Zen vill you throw ze bomb?"

"What's the good of that?" returned Monty, impatiently. "We should only kill a dozen or so of those just below us. The rest would be none the worse."

Jean was silent, and Monty felt he was puzzled. So was he himself. "Eef we make ze light shine down, zen zey might come to look," suggested Jean at last.

"Much more likely to scare them off," replied Monty. "No, we've got to excite their curiosity without frightening them."

"Zen we drop some leetle stone into ze pool," said Jean.

"That might work, but I believe we could do better. See here, Jean. Suppose I tie my watch to the end of a string and dangle it just out of their reach, above the pool."

Jean chuckled softly. "I sink heem a good plan. But come a leetle way off from ze 'ole, so we can light ze lamp again. Zen we can see to tie heem."

This seemed good sense and they went back some yards. But they did not light the acetylene. Monty used his electric torch.

Monty's watch was a cheap gun-metal arrangement. He fastened it to the end of a length of string, and let it down slowly and cautiously until he judged that it was dangling some ten or twelve feet above the surface of the pool. Then he stopped paying out the cord, and he and Jean lay breathlessly silent waiting to see what would happen. The silence was broken only by the musical tinkle of the fall.

They had not long to wait. Evidently the apes' keen ears must have caught the ticking

of the watch, for out of the surrounding gloom a grey figure appeared, silent as a ghost, and standing upright by the edge of the pool, stretched a long arm upwards. But the watch was out of reach. The creature moved away and vanished. There was a pause. Monty could almost hear his own heart beating. He feared that his ruse had failed.

Jean nudged him with his elbow, and Monty saw that the creature, or one as big, was coming back. And there was a second and a third—yes, and ever so many more. They were gathering in scores around the edge of the little pool, mopping and grimacing.

They were talking, too, queer grunting sounds, yet quite evidently speech of a sort. It gave Monty a queer feeling to hear these beasts, which looked like apes, talking together. They pointed up at the watch, and were evidently intensely curious about it. Some of the elder apes were making deep growling sounds, and Monty wondered if they had realized the presence of himself and Jean.

He did not think it likely, for the draught was upwards, not downwards. Also the falling water would tend to destroy the scent. At the same time he knew that the eyes of the apes were wonderfully keen, and it was just possible that they could see the heads over the edge of the opening.

He felt the bomb which was in a case in the

big poaching pocket of his coat. "Jean, do you think I'd better chance it, and chuck the bomb now?"

"I sink you better wait a leetle, wait till zey all come round."

"But they're not coming round. I don't think there are as many as there were a minute ago. Jean, I've got it in my mind that they know we're here."

"Eef zey 'ave, vat can zey do? Zey cannot come here."

"You can't tell. There might be some way up that we don't know anything about. This is a big cave and we haven't explored it." He looked down again. "I'm sure there are not so many. No, they're moving away. Jean, light the acetylene lamp again."

Jean began feeling in his pocket for matches. Just then Monty heard or thought he heard the tinkle of a falling stone, and like a flash he pulled out his electric torch and switched it on. The thin white beam cut the darkness, then, as he moved it this way, and that, suddenly the light was reflected in two eyes that glowed dull red. And behind them the gleam showed the huge hairy body of a great bull ape in the act of emerging from a low-roofed hole in the cave wall opposite.

"I told you so," snapped Monty. "There they are." As he spoke he pulled his automatic from his pocket and fired twice straight at the

giant beast. The crackle of quick reports filled the cavern with stunning echoes, and was followed by a sound like thunder as a huge mass of rock fell from the roof and crashed to the floor. The first ape fell, but instantly another took its place, and there were more behind. At this moment Jean got the acetylene lamp going and its glare flung up the surroundings in strong relief. The hole was full of apes crowding upwards!

Monty at once realized the peril. "Run, Jean!" he cried. "Run for the passage. It's our only chance. If they once get round us we're done."

Jean already had his pistol out, and he and Monty retreated as quickly as they dared towards the passage by which they had come. But before they reached it the apes were in dozens. Monty and Jean fired at the nearest and killed several, but Monty could see that many of the cunning beasts were hurrying along close under the walls on either side. It was quite clear that they knew exactly the only direction in which escape was possible, and meant to cut off the invaders.

"Hurry, Jean!" snapped Monty. "Hurry or they'll get there ahead of us." He himself broke into a run, but on the rough and rugged floor it was impossible to travel anything like so fast as the apes. There was something horribly uncanny in the silence which the brutes preserved, and Monty saw with growing dismay that more and more were pouring into the cave. The place seemed full of the great, shadowy, shaggy, swift-

moving forms. Many, he could see, carried heavy clubs.

Slipping and stumbling, Monty and Jean managed to reach the mouth of the steep ascent into the upper tunnel. Monty was horrified to see how steep the climb was. He made a rush, slipped, fell, and at that moment a giant ape leapt forward, smiting at him with a great bone club. Jean pistolled the brute almost at arm's length, and its huge body fell with a thud almost on top of Monty. Jean dragged Monty to his feet, and together they made a dash up to a ledge a score of feet above the floor of the cave. Then, facing round, they both opened fire.

A dozen apes were close upon them, but four fell dead and the rest dropped back a little. Now there were literally hundreds in the cave. The place was full of them, and the glare of the acetylene lamp showed rank upon rank of shaggy heads, fierce eyes, and great gnashing canine teeth.

Monty's heart sank, for he knew that even if every bullet told, they had not enough cartridges to kill half of their dreadful enemies.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE LAST STAND

THERE was a harsh, barking roar from one of the great bull apes, and suddenly the whole lot seemed to melt away out of sight. Jean stared in amazement. "Zey are scared!" he cried in sudden triumph.

But Monty knew better. "Never think it, Jean. That was an order to keep back out of range of our pistols. The brutes have learnt something from their last two battles. See, they are not far off. They are hiding behind rocks, slinking in under the walls. They are all there."

"But zey 'ave gone back," returned Jean. "We can climb up ze passage where zey can only come one or two at a time."

"Oh, can we?" retorted Monty. "I only wish we could. Look at the pitch of the slope behind us. We've got to scramble on hands and knees, while those beasts can run like lamplighters. I tell you they've got us in a trap."

"Zen one of us must climb, and ze other 'old zem off," declared Jean. "Zat is ze way to do."

"It's a slim chance," replied Monty. "If they make a real rush it'll take more than one pistol to hold them back."

Jean looked grave. Monty was right, for he knew by this time that the apes had brute pluck and would sacrifice lives to gain their end. They were human enough for that. "And eef we stay here, what zen?" he asked.

"They can stay longer than we can," replied Monty, quietly. "But I don't think they will stay. I believe they are planning to make a rush."

"Zen it is ze bomb," said Jean.

Monty glanced round at his companion. "Has it occurred to you what will happen if I chuck a bomb in this cave, Jean?" he asked.

"Vy, it veel blow up ze apes," replied Jean.

"I've no doubt of that," said Monty, drily, "but if a few pistol shots have brought great chunks of rock down, what will a bomb do? For myself, I'm pretty sure it will bring the whole roof with it, and flatten us as well as the apes."

Jean nodded gravely. "I see," he said. "Yes, it ees quite, vat you say, on ze cards." The Frenchman was amazingly cool, and Monty had never admired him more than he did at that moment when they stood face to face with a hideous death.

Jean swung his lamp and its light fell upon the nightmare shapes of their shaggy enemies. "Walk backwards, Monsieur Monty," he said, quietly. "Go slow backwards. Eet is more narrow behind, and zey vill not reach us so easy."

Monty glanced back over his shoulder and

saw that Jean was right. "You, too, Jean," he said.

"Yes, but you go be'ind me."

It was characteristic of the young Frenchman to place himself in the more dangerous position.

Monty began to move back. He went very slowly, and indeed it was impossible to do anything else, for the slope was very steep and rough. Jean, too, retreated, but they had not gone more than a few yards before they saw a movement among the apes.

"Look out!" whispered Monty. "They're going to rush."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before the same harsh, barking cry that they had heard before sounded through the cave, and instantly came the thud thud of hundreds of feet as the shaggy beasts rushed forward. There were so many that they covered the cave floor like a grey carpet. Everything was a nightmare of leaping bodies and fiery eyes reflecting the brilliant light of the acetylene lamp.

Jean and Monty had both reloaded their pistols, and they met the rush with quick, steady firing. Both knew that not a bullet must be wasted, and they waited till the leaders of the apes were actually in the mouth of the passage before pulling trigger. At such a range the bullets drove right through the bodies of the apes, the same bullet sometimes drilling two of the beasts. The apes meant business this time, however, and regardless

of the storm of bullets came leaping recklessly on, intent only on reaching the two humans who defied them.

It was only the narrowness of the tunnel and the fact that Monty had Jean were standing on a higher level than their enemies that saved them. More and more of the apes fell, every bullet hitting its mark. There was a momentary check in the attack, and Monty seized the chance to thrust a fresh clip of cartridges into his automatic.

"Look out!" cried Jean, sharply. As he spoke he raised his arm to fire again at a huge, evil-looking creature which suddenly dashed forward. Before he could pull trigger, some heavy object came whistling through the air from the cave below. It missed Jean's head by a matter of inches, but struck his arm, which fell numbed to his side, while the pistol clattered to the rock floor. Monty saw that the missile was one of the great bone clubs wielded by the master apes.

Another of those and there would be the end. He hesitated no longer but whipped the bomb from its case, pulled the pin, and flung it with all his force out into the cave beyond.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE END OF THE APES

“DOWN, Jean! Down!” shouted Monty, as he threw the bomb, and in the act of dropping, he pulled Jean down with him. The pause between flinging the bomb and its explosion was actually only a matter of five or six seconds, yet to Monty each second seemed a minute.

Then came the rending crack of the explosion, and a fierce back draught of air rushed up the passage and across the two who lay flat upon the steeply-sloping rock floor. Luckily Monty had got one arm round a projecting point of rock, and with the other hand held Jean tightly.

Again a pause, only a second or so, then a crash which was as much louder than the first as a twelve-inch gun exceeds in sound that of a rifle shot.

“The roof! It’s all coming down!” cried Monty, but he could not even hear his own voice. With a series of tremendous roars gigantic masses of rock were falling from the roof of the upper cave.

Hundreds—thousands of tons. The air was so thick with dust that the light burned dim and yellow, and Monty felt as though he were suffocating. Would it never stop?

But even this was not the end. As Monty lay, dazed, deafened and bewildered, the whole solid rock beneath him began to quake, and with a sound so tremendous that it beggared description, the cliff itself seemed to give way.

Tremors like those of an earthquake shock nearly flung Monty from his hold. Under the tremendous weight of the masses of stuff which the explosion had rent from the roof of the upper cave, the floor of this cave had given way, and thousands upon thousands of tons of rock were thundering down into the great cavern of the apes below.

The dull air was full of flashes of light as the grinding masses of stone struck sparks one from another as they cataracted downwards. The fog of dust thickened. The frightful concussion brought stones leaping down the steep passage from above. Several struck Monty and Jean, bruising them badly, but luckily none were large enough to do serious injury.

Each moment Monty expected to feel the rock of the passage itself crumble, but the seconds dragged by, and still he and Jean were safe. So stupefied that he was hardly able even to think, Monty heard one final roar so terrific that it could only be compared to a volcanic explosion. The whole cliff seemed to burst outwards, and suddenly through the murk and fog of dust daylight gleamed.

For quite another minute Monty lay still. He

was so stunned that he was incapable of motion. Indeed, he hardly knew whether he was alive or dead, and the silence which had succeeded that last appalling crash seemed absolutely unnatural.

It was Jean's voice which recalled his wandering senses. "Zat was a vair strong bomb, Monsieur Monty," he said, in a dazed sort of way.

Monty burst out laughing. It was silly, hysterical sort of laughter, but he could not help it. And lying there in the dust and dirt on that steep slope, with a drop beneath him of hundreds of feet into chaos, he laughed and chuckled feebly till the tears ran down his cheeks.

Jean it was who pulled himself together. "Stop zat, Monsieur Monty!" he commanded. He sat up, and with his unhurt arm fished a flask from his pocket. "You vill drink a leetle of zis," he ordered. Monty swallowed a little. It made him choke, then he stopped his laughing, sat up, and drew a long breath.

Jean was gazing down into the emptiness before them. "Ze apes—zey are finished at last!" he said, gravely. "Zey are gone—done—made mincestuff!"

"Yes, I think that's the end of them," replied Monty, with a slight shiver. "I can't think how we escaped, Jean. The whole front of the cliff seems to have fallen outwards."

"He vas all 'ollow, I sink," said Jean. "And when one cave fell down, ze ozzers burst also."

Suddenly Monty went white as a sheet. He

gave a strangled cry. "Dick!" he exclaimed. "I'd forgotten Dick. Suppose the ledge has gone?" He wheeled round as he spoke, and set to clawing his way back up the steep, wet, slippery slope.

Suddenly Jean's voice recalled him to his senses. "You vill 'ave to 'elp me, Monsieur Monty. My arm, eet is 'urt."

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE CLOSEST CALL

THE wonder was that Jean's arm had not been broken by the force of the blow from the great bone club which the ape had hurled at him. As it was, it was terribly bruised, and he could hardly use it. Monty had to help him up the steeper slopes. And Monty himself was in such a state of miserable anxiety as he had never known before. He was devoted to Dick, and the feeling that his quiet, capable brother might at this moment be lying smashed to atoms in the depths of that vast landslide was absolute agony.

So wretched was he that he quite forgot that Jean could no longer climb, and it was not until they reached the bottom of the thirty-foot drop that he remembered this. There was the rope still in position, but it was obviously impossible for Jean to ascend it.

Jean was plucky as usual. "You leave me 'ere, Monsieur Monty," he said. "Zen you climb up and find Monsieur Dick. I sink you find 'im quite safe. 'E vill come wiz you to 'elp me up."

There was nothing else for it. That was plain enough, so with a heavy heart Monty started up the rope. He was astonished to find how exhausted

he was. It took every ounce of his strength to clamber up that thirty feet, and when at last he reached the top he was dripping at every pore, and feeling faint and sick.

But he could not wait to rest. He was far too anxious. He looked down at Jean. "All right, Jean," he said, pluckily. "I won't be long." Then he was off again, struggling up the long, steep slope.

He had just reached the big turn when a small stone came rattling down past him from above. He stopped short and drew his pistol. Could it possibly be an ape that had escaped and climbed upwards by some unknown path? Next moment he heard steps, and a gleam of light came from above. "Dick!" he yelled. "Dick!"

"Monty! Is it you?" came back Dick's voice, and here he came running recklessly down the steep. "I thought you were dead!" he cried, as he seized his brother's hand, and his voice was so hoarse and broken that Monty hardly knew it.

As for Monty himself, he had to swallow once or twice before he could reply. "And I thought you were killed, Dick," he said, thickly.

"No, I'm all right, and the 'plane, though upon my word I believed the whole cliff was coming down into the valley. What happened, Monty? Was it the bomb?"

Monty explained briefly.

"And Jean—where is he?" asked Dick, anxiously.

Monty told him, and the brothers started back down the slope. Between them, they managed to get Jean up the precipice, then they rested a while and slowly walked back to the upper ledge, where the *Falcon* lay safe and sound.

The first thing Monty did was to go to the edge and look over. The sight beneath left him gasping. Although he had been prepared for something pretty big, it seemed impossible that one small bomb could have brought about such a catastrophe. A space of cliff nearly a thousand feet in height and a quarter of a mile in length had fallen outwards into the valley, and where there had previously been green grass there now rose a mountain of raw rock. As for the apes, there was not the faintest sign of one, not even a dead body. Pieces of rock were still breaking away and rumbling downwards, to add to the vast heap beneath.

Monty turned, and Dick saw that he looked pale and shaken. "A bit wholesale, old chap," said Dick, "but, after all, nothing better could have happened. You've not only wiped out the ape colony, but buried them."

Monty shuddered. "Let's get back, Dick. I don't feel safe up here. I shouldn't wonder if there's a bigger fall than ever before it's finished."

"Oh, it's pretty well all over now, I think," replied Dick, "but, like you, I shan't be sorry to see the last of this place."

“Or of zis valley either,” put in Jean. “It ees not a proper place.”

Dick clambered into the cabin of the 'plane, and took his seat. “I think I agree with you. Turn her round a bit,” he said to the others. “I don't want to risk touching the cliff face with a wing.”

Monty and Jean did as he asked, then climbed in. “All right,” said Monty. “Start her up.”

Dick switched on and pressed the self-starter. As the big engine burst into its familiar roar Monty felt a strange quiver which he instinctively knew was not caused by the vibration of the engine.

“Quickly, Dick!” he yelled at the pitch of his voice. “For Heaven's sake, be quick! The ledge is going.”

Without an instant's hesitation, Dick sent the big 'plane rushing along the ledge. The tremor changed instantly into a frightful, rending sound, and the *Falcon* tilted at a terrible angle. Paralysed with horror, Monty and Jean watched the whole ledge swing outwards. Like a flash Dick took the only course left, swung the 'plane to the left and wheeled her right off the edge of the falling terrace.

She fell, too, and for an awful moment all in her believed that she would nose-dive to the valley floor. It was the wonderful work Dick had put into her that saved her—that and his own extraordinary coolness. When within no

more than a couple of hundred feet of the ground, Dick managed to flatten her out, and she shot forward like a skimming bird.

To Monty, looking out behind, it seemed as if the whole precipice was falling. With a thunder of sound that beggared description, a mountain of rock crashed into the valley. Then the blast of air caused by the fall caught the 'plane and hurled her forward. For a matter of seconds she was beyond even Dick's control, and spinning like a dead leaf in a gale. It looked as if nothing could save her from destruction, and as for Monty, who was clinging to anything he could hold to, it seemed as if he were standing on his head.

Then came a second gust, but this, by a happy chance, seemed to rebound from the ground and flung the *Falcon* to a tremendous height in the air. Somehow Dick got hold of her again and Monty felt her once more on level keel. Three minutes later she came safely to ground within a few hundred yards of the great gas fountain.

Monty staggered across to Dick. "You saved us all, old chap," he said, hoarsely.

Dick looked up, and though his face was pinched and drawn he managed to smile. "Almost as bad as the whirlstorm, Monty," he answered. "But now, thank goodness, our job here is done, and we're leaving this place just as soon as we can fix up our petrol supply."

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE GIFT OF GLIJ

“’PON my word, Dick, I never saw such workers in my life.” The speaker was Monty, and he and Dick were watching a crowd of the Feather Men busy on the *Falcon*, tuning her up for her return across the ice-cap.

Four weeks had passed since the catastrophe which had finished the apes, and now the Feather Folk, for the first time in generations, were once more masters of their valley. So far as could be discovered, not one of the horrible grey apes was left alive, and though there were still many dangerous beasts in the valley, yet these the Feather Folk no longer feared.

For Dick, who was a good chemist, had shown them how to make black powder, and already they had a fine store of bombs with which they could clear the river of its hideous devil fish, and safely face the giant insects which had grown to monster size in the recesses of the deep, hot caves. These new weapons had inspired them with such confidence that they no longer shrank about under cover of fog, but walked bravely in the open. Already they had begun to cultivate their fields again, and to tend the huge iguano-

dons which had been left to look after themselves for goodness knows how many years.

But their best efforts so far had been for their visitors. Filled with a perfect passion of gratitude, they had worked in shifts all through the twenty-four hours, preparing the petrol and repairing the *Falcon*. The oil from the spring had turned out to be of wonderful purity, and Dick had had little trouble in distilling a very excellent spirit from it.

The *Falcon* had been somewhat damaged in her wild dive from the falling ledge, but the Feather Men, who were simply wonderful workers in their particular metal, had made all that good, and also insisted on refitting the cabin with seats and furniture made of this very strong and light metal. And they had inlaid the nose of the machine with a curious device which Anton told Monty was their "Good Luck" sign.

Monty spoke again. "I hated this place at first, Dick," he said, slowly.

"So did I," agreed Dick.

"But I'm sorry to leave now," said Monty.

"So am I," agreed Dick. "Very sorry indeed."

"Well, all's ready now," said Monty. "I suppose we must start in a few hours."

"Yes, immediately after dinner," replied Dick.

They turned and went into the cave, and the children greeted them with curious little shrill cries of delight, and came crowding round.

"Jolly little beggars," said Monty. "Wish we could take some with us."

Dick laughed. "We've got enough to carry already," he said, as they went into the big cave where all were to have their last meal together. Good things were piled on their plates, and the elders of the Feather Folk made speeches in their honour. It was a great occasion, and when at last it was over and it was time to start, the whole population came out to see them off.

Anton was carried out, and put carefully in a special seat which had been made for him in the cabin of the 'plane. Then the rest got aboard. Just at the last moment Glij, who was Monty's firmest friend, and who, with Klin, had been away all the previous day on some mysterious errand of his own, pressed a beautifully-made little metal box into Monty's hand. "He says you are not to open it till you get back to the ship," translated Anton, and Monty put the box in his pocket, with many thanks.

Last handshakes, a shrill cheer, Dick switched on, the *Falcon* rushed forward over the smooth turf, lifted, and Dick wheeled her upwards. Monty took a last look down at the crowd of little people in their silvery garments, and waved his hand. Then Dick turned on full power, and at a steep slant the big machine went zipping upwards. In a few moments she had reached the great cloud canopy and plunged into the grey mist.

Now it took all Dick's skill to handle her, and

he rose in small spirals, with Monty and Jean watching, one on each side, to warn him of too near an approach to the gigantic cliff walls. The temperature fell fast, frost began to thicken on the outside of the machine, and Monty caught glimpses of the giant icicles which hung from every projecting crag.

Up and up, and suddenly they broke through the cloud, and for the first time in nearly six weeks saw the sun shining in a pale blue sky. Monty heaved a sigh of relief. They had struck a patch of fine weather, and now, if only the *Penguin*, the ship from which they had landed, was safe, all was well.

Dick swung north-east, and headed straight for the pass through the great mountain range. The wind was behind them, and the speed rose to nearly two miles a minute. The desert of ice shot away beneath them. Beyond the pass Dick began to rise again. "So as to see the *Penguin*," exclaimed Monty to Anton.

Now, even inside the electrically-heated cabin, the thermometer fell nearly to freezing point. Outside, the air was probably fifty below zero. Monty never moved from his window, the glass of which, treated with a glycerine preparation, remained clear. Anton, too, sitting up on his couch, was watching with breathless interest as he passed so swiftly and easily above the vast stretches of ice over which he and his companions had spent weary days, toiling afoot.

Monty gave a sudden shout. "The sea!" He dived for his field-glasses, but at present the sea was a mere blue blink on the horizon. The engine roared, the 'plane flashed through the icy sky, and the blue mist grew clearer every moment. Soon Monty could see white specks, which were great bergs floating. Another ten minutes, and he and Jean together shouted again, "The *Penguin*!"

"She's there!" Monty cried in Dick's ear. "I can see her in the harbour. She's safe! We're all right!"

Dick did not answer, but the glow on his face showed that he was as delighted as Monty himself. After that it was all plain sailing, and in another quarter of an hour the *Falcon*, with engines stopped, came swooping down out of the sky to the level space beside her shed.

Monty flung open the door of the cabin and fairly hurled himself out. Indeed, he would have gone on his nose on the ice if a pair of arms had not caught him.

"Anton! Have you got him?" cried a voice.

"You bet we have," answered Monty, then stopped and stared. For the man who had caught him was Monsieur Javelot himself, Anton's father. Monsieur Javelot without his crutches, and looking almost as strong as Captain Bates himself who, with his brown face one beam, was waiting with hands outstretched.

"Monsieur Javelot is well again!" gasped Monty.

"That's a fact," said Bates. "Fit as a fiddle. This life suits him all right. And you look well yourself, Monty my lad. Why, you're fat."

"So'd you be if you'd been fed like we have lately," grinned Monty. "But wait till we're aboard. Then you shall hear all about it. We'll have to get the *Falcon* shipped before we do anything else."

"That's a fact," replied the skipper. "You can't trust this weather, though I must say we've had a mighty fine spell lately. I'll order some of the men ashore to help you. Who will you have?"

"Any one you can spare," replied Monty. Then his face clouded. "No, there's one chap I won't have. That's Brown."

"You couldn't have him if you wanted," replied Captain Bates, gravely. Then, as he saw Monty's look of surprise, "You know that gale we had the day you left—when we had to run for it out to sea?"

"I should think I do," replied Monty, grimly.

"Well, during that gale Brown vanished. He must have been washed overboard, but no one saw him go." He paused. "But why did you say you didn't want him?"

"Because it was he who nearly did for the *Falcon*, and us, too. But I'll tell you all about it later. Now let's get the *Falcon* to pieces and stow her aboard."

A few hours later the *Penguin*, with the big 'plane stowed safely below decks, was working

out to sea, and a cheery party gathered at supper in her cabin.

The meal over, Monsieur Javelot raised his glass. "To my English friends!" he cried. "I drink to the health of the brave boys who have rescued my son. To the clever brain that designed the *Falcon* and the clever hands that guided her!"

Blushingly Dick stood up to reply. "Anyhow," he ended, "we had the most wonderfully interesting time, and some day, if I can afford it, I'm going back to see those jolly little Feather Folk."

Dick sat down, and suddenly Monty jumped up. He was very eager and excited.

"We can afford it all right, Dick," he said, quickly, and taking from his pocket the little box which Glij had presented to him, turned the contents out on the table.

These consisted of about a dozen rather dull-looking crystals, each about the size of a hazel nut. Every one stared, then Anton laughed delightedly. "Diamonds, Monty. Yes, I was in the secret. And not one of them worth less than a thousand pounds!"

THE END.

